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The school is not a learning environment: how language matters for the practical study of educational practices

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ABSTRACT

In this invited commentary for the special issue on 'How built spaces influence practices of educators' work: An examination through practice lens,' I discuss how insights from the theory of practice architecture and the theory of practice ontology are helpful in exploring the complexities of educational practices, particularly with reference to the locations within and through which such practices take place. By focusing on the doings, sayings and relatings that take place in such practices and on their material conditions, the contributions add much nuance and detail to the understanding of educational practices, particularly when such practices are 'in transition' due to forces that are often beyond the influence of the actors in such practices themselves. The main critical point I make concerns the sayings utilised by the authors themselves. I suggest that references to 'learning' are problematic in the study of educational practices. I single out the idea of seeing schools, colleges and universities as 'learning environments.' I provide reasons why this way of engaging with educational practices is problematic – both from a research perspective and from a practice and policy perspective – and suggest that the better designation would be that of seeing them as educational practices.

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Introduction: the importance of locations

The question of where we are and where things 'take place,' is a really important one. After all, not all locations are the same and, more importantly, locations differ with regard to what can be done and what cannot be done, what is easy to do and what is difficult, what is 'in view' and what is hidden, what can be said and what remains silent, what makes sense and what appears as nonsense, what is possible and what is impossible, what is allowed and what is forbidden, and so on. Places are not just physical locations – although they are that as well – and also not just ecosystems to which living organisms are more or less adapted and adjusted. The places where human lives take place are imbued with meaning for those who act within and 'through' them. Moreover,

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this is never just a matter of individuals acting out their own trajectories, but happens in and through relationships, including relationships of meaning and interpretation and also relationships of power, empowerment, and constraint. And in all this, human beings are not simply 'bodies in space,' but are individuals with the capacity for thought, reflection, judgement, and agency (which doesn't say anything, of course, about whether or how such capacities will be utilised in particular locations and settings).

The seven papers brought together in this special issue, explore different aspects, manifestations and configurations of educational places and spaces, and share an interest in the relationships between such places and spaces and what happens 'in' and 'through' them. Theoretically, all papers engage with these questions through an engagement with the idea of 'practice' and, in most cases, utilise ideas from work on practice architectures as developed by Stephen Kemmis and colleagues. What is helpful about the theory of practice architectures is that it has moved understandings of practice away from an emphasis on mere 'doing,' so as to include modes of action ('doings'), forms of understandings ('sayings'), and ways in which people relate to one another and the world ('relatings'). The theory of practice architecture also highlights that practice as a 'form of socially established cooperative human activity' is not just made up of these three components, but that the components '"hang together" in a distinctive project' (Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 155). Moreover, it pays attention to the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements and set-ups that hold practices in place, thus providing a comprehensive set of concepts and angles to engage with the complexities of what we might term practice-in-action. Theodore Schatzki has developed a similar 'interconnected' account of practice (see also the summary he provides of his approach in his own contribution to this collection). His work, perhaps a bit more than practice architecture, highlights the role of the material dimensions of social life, which leads him to suggest that 'the central phenomenon in social life is, not practices, but practice-arrangement bundles' which, in turn, 'form wider constellations' (see Schatzki, this issue).

In this invited commentary I would like to share some of my reading experiences and observations. In doing so, I am particularly interested in the educational dimensions of the contributions – both where these are present and where these are absent. I do believe that the focus on practice, particularly through the theoretical framings utilised in the papers, is very helpful for adding detail to our understanding of the complexities of education. However, in doing so, it is of crucial importance that the educational 'sayings' that are used in such analyses are sufficiently thought-through as well and also that they are sufficiently *educational* – a point I will explain in more detail in this contribution.

From built spaces to practice arrangements

In the call for papers for this special issue, the overarching ambition was phrased in terms of the question how built spaces influences practices of educators' work. Posing the question in this way, seems to assume that built spaces are relatively stable backdrops that either enable or constrain certain activities. While there is certainly evidence of this – think, for example, of the way in which airport terminals or shopping malls try to 'route' people in very particular ways – practice theory already complicates such an understanding. It does so partly by highlighting that the ways in which people actually use buildings can differ significantly from what their designers intended (unless, of

course, the use of the building is heavily policed, which is not uncommon with airports and shopping malls), so that in this regard it makes more sense to think of architecture as space and its use *together*, rather than just space (on such a definition see Tschumi 1994). But both in the call for papers and in the papers that make up this special issue, the focus shifts quite quickly to 'practice arrangements' and what they enable and constrain – precisely in order to highlight that physical space and built environment are 'elements' of what makes up a practice, not 'containers' in which practices take place or within which people practice.

Theodore Schatzki's paper is particularly enlightening here, as he shows in much detail how particular educational practices are intimately tied up with many other elements. What is nice about his analysis of the 'crisis' that emerged when suddenly university education had to move out of its usual 'habitat' (my term) due to the Covid-19 pandemic, is how many of these arrangements are taken for granted under 'normal' circumstances but suddenly become visible through the 'troubles' that emerge when those circumstances change. One interesting observation he makes is that educators tend to think of the practical and material arrangements as secondary to what they seek to achieve with their students, and that they suddenly found themselves in a situation where these arrangements became primary, that is driving and often constraining their opportunities for action (see also Biesta 2020). He also highlights the emergence of 'compression,' that is, that in one particular location – often the 'home' from which 'work' took place – many different things were going on at the same time, so that it was hard for such spaces 'to acquire singular identities.'

Schatzki not only concludes that 'stable and effective educating depends on the provision of adequate or appropriate physical spaces' and that 'educating bundles must be part of ecologies of bundles that support their mission,' but also suggests 'that educators have known these facts all along.' The crisis he documents may have made educators more aware of this, and may also have stimulated or forced them to make this knowledge more 'active' rather than just being there in the background. I tend to agree with Schatzki on this point, as I do think that much of the work of educators is precisely to orchestrate particular arrangements for their students and to do so with particular educational ambitions in mind. The latter element is underdeveloped in Schatzki's contribution. This is partly because the discursive side of what is going on is not really analysed – the troubles he documents are mainly obstructions to familiar ways of *acting* and not so much obstructions to familiar ways of talking about, 'in' and 'with' such action.

Schatzki does refer to 'effective,' 'good,' and 'excellent' education in his concluding section, but doesn't really reveal what these words stand for. Where this becomes problematic, in my view, is in his brief discussion of Rosa's idea of 'resonance' – understood as 'a healthy, harmonious connection to a world that is felt to be meaningfully connected to oneself' – and his observation that such resonance was 'missing' during 'that fateful spring.' After all, to suggest that resonance is educationally desirable and the absence of resonance is educationally undesirable, is hugely problematic and even dangerous. This is first and foremost because totalitarian educational regimes precisely aim to keep individuals in a state of resonance with regard to particular ideologies, rather than that they encourage them to take a critical stance towards such ideologies. It could be argued, therefore, that *interruption* rather than *resonance* should be the crucial educational key-word (see Biesta 2009a).

The papers by Wilkinson and colleagues and by Langelotz and Mahon provide similar explorations to those of Schatzki, in that they also explore what happens when familiar practice arrangements are interrupted. The paper by Wilkinson and colleagues documents the impact a new building – with a significantly different lay out and thus a significantly different ideology from the building that the participants in the study used to work in – had on ways of working, doing and relating. The changes documented in this paper are significant, and particularly seem to concern the more informal and spontaneous ways of relating. This is, in a sense, ironic as one might expect – and I am sure some architects would actually argue this point – that open plan offices, and flexible workspaces more generally, would rather allow for *more* informal interaction rather than less (or at least less than in office buildings where everyone has their own office). One thing that the paper highlights is that the architecture itself is, in a sense, policed by the way in which access is regulated. The point is not that in open office spaces locked doors are simply removed so that everyone can float freely; the locks simply appear in other places and often make access more restricted, or at least more difficult. Much depends on who holds the key – or, more likely, who holds the key card – which also reveals how the 'open' architecture of the building the paper writes about actually also involves a significant redistribution of power.

The participants in the study generally seem to perceive this transition as a loss, though it is important to bear in mind that this loss is only perceivable *because* of the transition. If everyone always had only worked in this particular kind of building and this particular kind of architecture, there would at least not have been something to compare the (new) situation with. Once more this raises the question of the role of 'sayings' – and of the discursive dimensions of the practice more generally – because one could ask (and this could have been explored more in the analysis) what kind of discursive resources the participants utilised or had available to make sense of their 'doings,' or, if sense-making is a bit too 'strong,' what kind of discursive resources they had to *accompany* their doings and relatings.

It is with regard to this, that I have some concerns about the particular 'framing' which the authors of the paper are using, namely in terms of 'professional learning.' What I found useful about the analysis, is the emphasis on the change in *practices*. The two phrases that appeared in bold in the copy of the paper I read were, after all, (a shift in) 'practices of collegiality' and (a shift in) 'doctoral supervisory practices,' and both descriptions are entirely accurate and, in a sense, also entirely sufficient. These shifts lead to different ways of relating (both to each other and to the material environment) and different ways of doing, which have an impact on the (perceived) quality of what is going on. But is this a matter of professional learning? Of changes in professional learning? I am not sure and think that this particular 'saying' – a 'saying' at the level of how the authors of this paper relate to practice under investigation – not just adds little, but actually takes away from the complexity of what is going on 'on the ground,' so to speak. If anything is happening at all – and the paper reveals that a lot is happening, of course – I found the phrase 'a praxis of "becoming an academic"' and the reference to 'academic labour' much more helpful than the blanket reference to 'professional learning,' not least because it doesn't seem that this saying is utilised prominently by the research participants themselves.

This is even more so in the paper by Langelotz and Mahon, where, ironically, the authors seem to want to 'frame' what happens in terms of professional learning, whereas this way of saying, this particular discourse, is largely absent in the accounts of the research participants. The authors seem to be aware of this – they write, for example, that one interviewee 'was talking primarily about their teaching and not specifically their professional learning,' and that another interviewee 'did not elaborate on how this impacted on their professional learning.' But it almost seems as if the authors 'blame' their interviewees for not doing so, rather than concluding that maybe for the interviewees their reality was precisely *not* one of professional learning or, put differently, one in which the 'saying' of professional learning was relevant or made sense. That is also why I think that the authors' suggestion that Robin is 'learning *in* teaching practice' is debatable and, in my view, actually not correct. What the 'case' of Robin shows, is a teacher who is engaged in thoughtful teaching – precisely what Schön's category of reflection-in-action is about – which is precisely *not* a matter of learning but a matter of doing and, more specifically of the particular doing called 'teaching' (see, for example, Shulman 2004; see also Biesta 2017a). While the shifts in practice documented in this paper are revealing, my concern is that the sayings with which the authors want to relate to (the doing within) these practices, seem to be at odds with the sayings that are present in the practice itself.

One might of course argue that this is precisely what research should do: that it should bring in different sayings than the sayings that circulate in the practices themselves. If we just think of sayings – or discourses – as frames of sense making, this may be correct. But in an account of practice where the sayings are actually partly *constitutive* of the practice, rather than frames of sense-making that are applied to the doings in the practice, such an approach becomes more problematic. There is, therefore, a methodological issue that I am highlighting here. But it has something to do with a bigger concern about the sayings that circulate in and around education – and to this concern I would like to turn next.

The school is not a learning environment (and neither are colleges and universities)

One could argue that if there is one phrase that is most closely aligned with the orientation of this special issue – one could even see it as a perfect fit – that it is the idea of 'learning environment' and, more specifically, the suggestion to think of schools, colleges and universities as learning environments (or, in a slightly different formulation, as spaces for learning). This particular discourse has definitely become dominant over the past decades in many educational circles and at many different 'levels,' including in policy, research and day-to-day practice. The papers by Blackmore and O'Mara and by Charteris, Kemmis and Smardon make extensive use of this way of speaking, and the latter paper also documents how the New Zealand Ministry of Education has actually mandated an expectation 'that all school-based learning environments address the ILE criteria in their design' (see Charteris, Kemmis and Smardon, this issue). The ILE criteria mentioned stem from OECD literature on 'innovative learning environments,' which is documented in more detail in the paper by Blackmore and O'Mara.

One thing I found remarkable about the paper by Charteris, Kemmis and Smardon is that it reveals how 'fluent' the participants in the study had already become in the saying

(I am inclined to use the word 'newspeak' here) of innovative learning environments. They seem to have accepted that the shift from the twentieth century to twenty-first-century learning is inevitable and needed, and seem mostly concerned with *how*-questions, that is, with how to 'implement' this shift and make sure that the teachers they lead make the shift, rather than with *why*-questions, such as questions about whether, how and to what extent this shift is actually desirable or not. Either the paper shows that the participants don't seem to have their own professional discourse with which they can make sense of the policy discourse – and perhaps create a critical distance towards it – or the paper shows that the space for action for these educational leaders has already been so constrained and regulated that they are only 'allowed' to be concerned with how-questions and that, in a sense, the situation is already 'beyond' the why-questions.

This is where I think that this paper is extremely relevant as a research contribution, because what it does – and in doing so it shows the importance of the different practice architecture within which the authors themselves work; something which, in the past, we may have referred to as the idea of academic freedom – is precisely pointing out a number of fundamental contradictions in what is going on in the discourse of innovative learning environments. It is significant, and helpful, that they refer to ILE as an 'ideology,' but it is even more significant and helpful that they show how this ideology 'works,' in both articulating and hiding particular truths. As they put it, in their concluding section, 'the interrelated arrangements of practice architectures are so naturalised in our day-to-day existence that they are often invisible,' which means that an additional effort is needed to de-naturalise what is going on, so that what is going on can become visible again – and this is exactly what the paper does.

Their other point, namely that 'the structural arrangements that create site ontologies in workplaces prefigure ways of being and practicing' is entirely accurate as well, precisely because their analysis reveals how little room for manoeuvre there seems to be for the educational leaders they interviewed – both physical room for manoeuvre and discursive room for manoeuvre. The particular 'trick' their analysis brings into view, is the 'quick switch' (my term) between a progressive educational discourse that puts a concern for the student at its centre, and a neo-liberal discourse, that seems to do the same, but that, instead of putting a student in the centre and thus understands that what is going on is an educational dynamic, turns the student into a customer whose 'wants' (rather than needs) deserve to be satisfied, without asking 'difficult' questions.[1]

Whereas Charteris, Kemmis and Smardon are able to see the idea of (innovative) learning environments as an ideology, such a critical reading of the idea is more difficult to find in the paper by Blackmore and O'Mara. The authors seem to accept, for example, that there is 'an imperative to develop more innovative approaches to teaching and learning for the 21s century' (Blackmore & O'Mara, this issue) – without raising the question whether what is new (innovative) is automatically better or more desirable. They also seem to accept the need for 'soft skills' as 'critical to live and work in the ever-changing context of more flexible, interdependent, culturally diverse and digitally connected societies and workplaces' (Blackmore & O'Mara, this issue). They rely heavily on the OECD's definition of innovative learning environments and are rather optimistic about the suggestion that more innovative learning environments will bring about 'improved student learning,' 'purposeful change,' 'better learning outcomes,' and so

on. Whereas the paper provides detailed insights into the 'how,' questions about the 'why' are lacking. Is this a problem? I believe it is, and it has something to do with the notion of 'learning environments' and with seeing schools and other educational settings in those terms. I would like to offer three interconnected reasons why schools should not – and in a sense also cannot – be understood as learning environments.

If the idea of a learning environment has any meaning at all, the first reason for not characterising the school as a learning environment, is that it doesn't say anything *distinctive* about schools. If we take a widely accepted definition of learning as any more or less durable change of an individual (for example in cognition, understanding, skill) that is not the result of maturation but of interaction with the 'outside' world, then the only possible conclusion is that *all* environments are learning environments. Factories, offices, shops, the street, the internet, prisons, hospitals, the army, households, relationships, and so, all meet this definition, just, of course, as schools can be seen as environments where those who are 'around' can change in some way. But this tells us nothing about what the differences between these environments are, nor why we would actually need schools when there are already so many other environments where people can learn. (Even suggesting that schools are special because they are 'powerful' learning environments, doesn't really make sense, because Nike factories in Vietnam or IKEA factories in Bangladesh are far more powerful learning environments than the average school, particularly for the children and young people who are working there.)

Blackmore and O'Mara quote the 'OECD definition of an ILE' as being

> (i) learner-centred, (ii) structured and well-designed in that teachers support inquiry and autonomous learning; (iii) profoundly personalised in recognition of individual and group differences in terms of background, prior knowledge, motivation and abilities; (iv) inclusive of different learning needs; and (v) social, considering learning is most effective when cooperative and in group settings.

Is this a helpful set of principles for good education? Is it a helpful 'definition' of what a school is and should be about? The answer to these questions has to be 'no,' and the reason for this lies in the fact that these principles are applicable to educative, *un*educative, and even *anti*-educative settings alike. The crude example is that these principles are very helpful for – and probably entirely applicable to – ISIS training camps and the Hitlerjugend. After all, they only refer to 'learning' but do not specify what the learning is supposed to be *about*, and also not what it is supposed to be *for*. The principles can, in other words, be utilised for any agenda, because they only seem to be concerned about what is *effective* – a process-value – not about what is *desirable*.

This is more generally the problem with the use of the language of learning and with the rise of this language, this particular way of 'saying,' in education over the past two decades (see Biesta 2006; 2009b for a more detailed analysis and critique). Put briefly: the point of education can never be that students learn. The point of education has to be at the very least[2] that students learn *something*, that they learn it *for a reason*, and that they learn it *from someone* or, more specifically, that they learn it in and through particular educational relationships. 'Learning' itself is a completely *empty* term – at most it refers to change, but it says nothing about the 'quality' of the change – and is therefore not just unhelpful as an educational saying but in a sense even dangerous, as

it distracts from asking the questions that should be asked: question of *content* or, more broadly, of the *themes* that should be on the educational agenda; questions of *purpose* (What are we after with our students?); and questions of *educational relationships*. All three disappear from sight in the abstract – and I wish to add: empty – language of learning environments, as theme and purpose are not specified, and the specific nature of educational relationships seems to disappear.[3]

I do not doubt the efforts of the people that Blackmore's and O'Mara's research is about, nor do I doubt the efforts of its authors, but I am concerned that the language of learning and learning environments, of learning outcomes and improving student learning, remains empty and meaningless until we begin to specify what 'improved' student learning is, or whether learning can and should be seen as an 'outcome' or not. The most important question here, to put it briefly, is whether education should be positioned on the side of control or on the side of freedom; whether it should be positioned on the side of domestication or the side of emancipation; whether it should focus on 'useful knowledge' – so that students can become productive workers and obedient citizens and have the skills to flexibly adjust to everchanging circumstances – or rather on 'really useful knowledge,' so that students have the courage to say no when adjusting to the circumstances around them is precisely what should *not* happen (on the difference see Johnson 1979; on the importance of saying no see also Meirieu 2007).

Rather than 'accepting' the idea of learning environments – and even more so: accepting the discourse of learning environments – it is important that, as researchers but also, so I would wish to argue as practitioners – we have a different and better way of speaking; one that is thoroughly *educational* and doesn't dissolve the complex normative and political questions concerning education into the 'smooth' technical language of learning. Is there an alternative available? I would say that it is right in front of us, namely that we should understand and call schools, colleges and universities *educational practices* precisely in the complex and nuanced way in which 'practice' is understood and articulated in the theories that run through the different contributions in this special issue.

This brings me to my final observation.

Practice makes practice[4]

I have already indicated above that some of the papers in this collection turn the analysis of practice(s) to questions of (professional) learning. Now that I have clarified why I think that learning is a hugely problematic concept and particularly not a concept that is suitable in educational discourse, I can turn to the final two papers in this collection, about which my observations will be relatively brief. Both papers – the paper by Kostogriz, Adams and Bonar about international schools and the paper by Variyan and Reimer about interrupted academics – bear traces of the 'turn' towards learning. The analysis of the dynamics of the work of teachers in international schools is interesting and revealing and my brief observation here is that the paper could actually take out the word 'learning' without losing anything of its strength – and, from my perspective, it would actually gain in strength and precision.

After all, what the paper seeks to bring to light is the *work* of teachers and particularly all the 'extra' and 'hidden' work that is needed in order to navigate a rather complex practice with significant differences in power, access, and privilege. The discourse of

'learning,' and even the saying of 'learning,' doesn't really add anything to the analysis, and in a sense it distracts, because it suggests a deepening of analysis, but actually begins to hide the complexities of what is going on. Perhaps this also explains why the three keyterms of the theory of practice architectures are doings, sayings and relatings, and why 'learnings' is not part of this, precisely because adding 'learning' doesn't add to the analysis that is made possible with doings, sayings and relatings. As I have tried to show above, 'learning' is rather one of the sayings that circulate in certain practices, and I have provided reasons why I think that it's not a saying that should have a prominent place in educational practices – they should rather be 'freed' from it (see Biesta 2015).

Rather, therefore, than asking how practices may lead to or may result in learning, the only relevant question that should be asked, in my view, is how practices lead to further practices – which is precisely the question posed by Variyan and Reimer when they say that they wanted to explore how within particular 'new arrangements' *praxis might emerge* (see Variyan and Reimer, this issue). The point, in other words, is not how to learn from these arrangements, but rather how to 'practice anew' (ibid.), that is, how to make new, different, sometimes better practice out of changing arrangements. What is helpful about this paper is its emphasis on the moral and political dimensions of 'doing' practice, if that phrase makes sense.

This also means – and here there is a fundamental difference between the paper by Blakcmore and O'Mara and the paper by Variyan and Reimer – that 'doing' practice, that making new practice or trying to contribute to how new practices might emerge, is not just a matter of 'going with the flow' but can also involve resistance. And the act of resistance only becomes possible if there is a sense of what matters, which again highlights that practices are not neutral arrangements that can transform over time, but that they are ultimately human endeavours where components – or bundles – come together in a 'distinctive project,' that is, in something that is literally projected towards a future, without assuming that this future can simply be 'produced' through effective technical interventions. What the paper by Variyan and Reimer makes visible is what it means to find oneself in the middle of all this, and what it also helps to see is what it means to try to find a meaningful way to continue, that is, *to go on*.

Conclusion: the importance of sayings, or how language matters

In this brief paper I have shared some reflections on the seven contributions that make up this special issue. The papers represent an interesting spectrum. They reveal the potential of the theoretical framings they make use of – the theory of practice architectures and the theory of practice ontologies – particularly because these theoretical framings take practice beyond the mere practical and connect it to doings, sayings and relatings and the cultural–discursive, material–economic, and social–political arrangements and set-ups that hold practices in place.

My main concern has been the way in which the papers engage with the practice(s) of education and in my comments and observations I have particularly highlighted questions in relation to the 'sayings' that circulate in educational practices *and* in research that tries to study such practices. If practices are not just about what we do and how we relate to each other and wider environments, but if practices also consist of ways

in which we speak, make sense, and try to make a difference, then such sayings really matter. I have highlighted – and this concern goes well beyond the papers in this special issue – that the field of education suffers from an obsession with the language of learning and that this language actually distracts from what matters and should matter educationally.

Analytically the study of educational practices can often – and in my view probably always – do without references to learning. This is not just because the theories of practice utilised in this special issue are 'robust' enough in themselves, but also because from a research perspective there rather is a need to critically explore the particular sayings that circulate in particular practices, rather than simply accept them. Programmatically, any account of education needs to ensure that it has sayings that make sense to the reality of education. In this regard, then, the sayings are absolutely critical and essential for ensuring that education does not dissolve in un- or even anti-educational setups and practices. The papers brought together in this special issue reveal both risks and possibilities with regard to this important challenge.

Notes

1. An early discussion of the transformation of educational relationships into economic transactions can be found in Biesta (2004). How this has impacted the role and position of teachers is something I have explored in Biesta (2017b). How this has affected the relationship between education and society is discussed in Biesta (2019a; 2019b).
2. I say 'at the very least' because I think that learning is only one way in which we as human beings can exist and be in relationship with the world around us. There are other 'existential possibilities,' and it is important for education to open up such possibilities to our students as well. I discuss this in detail in Biesta (2015).
3. For a more detailed critique of the 'logic' of learning environments, including the concern that the idea of learning environments seems to favour adaptive forms of change in students, see Biesta (2016); see also Biesta (2018).
4. The title of this section is taken from Britzman (2003).

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