Beyond the bounded notion of the classroom: A theoretical orientation for evaluating the geographies of New Generation Learning Environments

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Leander, Phillips and Taylor’s (2010) critique of the bounded notion of the classroom is our point of departure for investigating how learning contained within a static conceptual space limits understandings of the geographies of learning. We reframe the traditional perceptions of the classroom as a container to make explicit the multi-dimensional nature of learning environments. The nested, intersecting, and overlapping characteristics of these spaces are reflected in our individual research approaches. Although the studies conducted by each author will follow a unique trajectory, the evaluation of effective learning spaces is a common and critical anchor allowing us to navigate new conceptions of spatial practice. One researcher maps student perceptions of how the learning environment impacts engagement. The second researcher investigates how teachers inhabit the physical space and negotiate the pedagogy within and around it. The third researcher considers the possibilities of learning that can occur outside schools, with a particular focus on museums. The final researcher looks at the ‘unknown’ space where the virtual blends with the actual. These approaches serve the purpose of highlighting the extraordinary terrain across which learning environment evaluations are situated.

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This paper by four commencing doctoral researchers is concerned with developing a theoretical orientation that may be applied to future research considering both the geographies and effectiveness of new generation learning environments. By adopting an explicit socio-spatial perspective we hope to transcend metaphors of space such as ‘geographies of learning environments’ or indeed ‘Terrains: Mapping learning environment evaluation across the design and education landscape’. We use Leander, Phillips, Taylor, Nespor, and Lewis’ (2010) critique of the “classroom-as-container” (p. 329) to open dialogues about how each of the four authors’ unique yet intersecting research trajectories might coevally move beyond the bounded notion of the classroom. In so doing we draw links with what this may mean for us in conducting research that in-part seeks to evaluate learning spaces across multiple terrains.

Lefebvre (1991) notes that space is not neutral, objective or innocent. Therefore it is important to bring a spatial consciousness to our imagined geographies in order to grasp the more evasive aspects of space, to make the unseen, seen. Leander et al (2010) employ Lefebvre’s analysis of a house to challenge assumptions held about space. The Lefebvrean house is first considered in terms of its physical structure: solid concrete walls, immobile, and stable. Then we are shown how stripping the house of its walls would reveal energies such as the internet, television, gas, and electricity flowing in and out, transforming the house into what Lefebvre describes as “an image of complex mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits” (as cited by Leander et al., 2010, p. 332). Leander et al then draw a parallel analysis of the classroom as “the epitome of immobility” (Leander et al., 2010, p. 332) bounded and contained by conventions such as material structure, teaching practice, parental expectations, timetables, seating plans, and daily routines. They ask how the classroom-as-container may be reimagined if it were stripped of its metaphorical walls, destroying its solid appearance. This raises the question of how this may affect our own approaches to research. How do we see the unseen? Hear the unheard? Develop a sonar system to help navigate the diverse geographies of new learning environments?

We begin by embracing an open, fluid, dynamic, lively view of learning environments, seeing them simultaneously as the social, material, conceptual, temporal, and virtual spaces of learning. This view of learning environments is underpinned by our understandings of space itself: an illusive theoretical concept, evading simple, singular, or fixed definitions. Hence, rather than defining space, we present the following ontology informed by the theories of Lefebvre (1991), Massey (2005), and Soja (2014):

- Space is interrelational (Lefebvre, 1991). The social, material, conceptual, temporal, virtual, corporeal, epistemological, and performative aspects of space are interrelated – or entangled if you like.
- Space is a sphere of multiplicity, coexisting heterogeneity, and coeval trajectories (Massey, 2005, p. 9).
- Space is “a product of a mutually formative socio-spatial interaction” (Soja, 2014, p. 13), a socio-spatial dialectic (Soja, 2014, p. 173), and as such is constantly under re-construction and subject to change (Massey, 2005, p. 9).
- Space is multi-dimensional and simultaneously encompasses the “real-and-imagined” (Soja, 2014, p. 177), the social and material.
- Space is not fully knowable: “There is always something that is hidden, beyond any analytical point of view, shrouded in impenetrable mystery” (Soja, 2014, p.177).

With this positioning we do not intend to create an open space/enclosed space dichotomy. Instead we understand the contained and uncontained as folding and collapsing into each other allowing for coexisting heterogeneous spaces. This ontology of space grounds the individual research trajectories of each author. We now turn our attention to these four studies: engaging spaces, inhabiting spaces, expanding spaces, and unbundling spaces. Although conceived separately, and dealing with unique research issues, there is a commonality in our efforts to identify and evaluate affective and/or effective learning spaces.

Research trajectory one: engaging spaces - Sarah Healy

My study seeks to reterritorialise the geographies of student engagement by collaborating with young people as researchers in an investigation into real and imagined spaces of engagement. An aim is to support the expansion of young researchers’ own socio-spatial awareness through photographic explorations of their perceived, conceived, and lived experiences (Lefebvre, 1991) of engaging spaces. It is anticipated this youth participatory approach will enable an unbinding of established spatial imaginations and a blurring of boundaries.
constructed by the class-room-as-container discourse.

Young people can be seen as experts in their own realm. Their perspectives are important because they offer unique insights that adult researchers might find obscured or beyond the horizon. However, as Thomson (2008) points out, youth participatory approaches to research are associated with complex notions of student voice, or, a nexus of voices. Young people speak from multiple vantage points with multiple, contradictory, and coexisting voices. In addition, each individual can be seen to have a number of ever changing voices with which s/he may choose to speak. One is the “schooled voice” (Thomson, 2008, p. 5). I would argue bounded notions of educational space, such as the classroom-as-container, are manifested through a young person’s schooled voice.

The methodological issue this brings up is how to frame youth participatory research so that it may realise the ideal of dissolving the walls of the house, classroom, or school rather than perpetuating existing frames of reference. Burke (2008) argues that explicitly adopting a critical framework that questions assumptions held by, and about, both adults and young people lays the foundations for richer youth participatory research outcomes. Building on this I propose that clearly adopting a critical socio-spatial perspective for my research will help raise students’ agency in their choice of voice with which to speak about space.

Critical use of visual research methods may also assist in creating possibilities for young people to speak with a less bounded and ‘unschooled voice’. For example, in a reflection on her Play in Focus study, Burke (2008) found that “enabling the visual voice of the child to articulate and define their spaces for play revealed much that countered prevailing notions held by adults about children’s preoccupations” (Bourke, 2008, p. 33). This suggests that enabling young people to articulate and define their spaces of engagement through a photographic voice may also unveil aspects of spatial practices of engagement previously unnoticed by adult researchers.

Burke (2008) also notes that a “photograph’s narrative becomes itself a participatory site for wider story-telling” (Bourke, 2008, p. 34). In this sense photographs by young people can be seen to have the potential to convey voices within voices and spaces within spaces. This allows for complex, multi-layered interpretations and analysis that have the potential to socially and spatially inform our emerging understandings of the dialectical relationships between student engagement and learning spaces. So, what will be the impact of this research? It is anticipated that ultimately it will add a valuable student perspective to the development of frameworks for evaluating student learning environments and student engagement.

**Research trajectory two: inhabiting spaces - Gina Grant**

This study proposes to investigate the position of the teacher within the learning environment. The traditional consideration of the classroom as being a container, where learning occurs at a particular period of time, in a particular mode, within a particular space, is one that most people accept without question, as it is the one that they have most likely experienced (Leander et al., 2010). Within this static structure, the teacher is seen as the transmitter of information. This dominant discourse of what a classroom was, and therefore what it should be, has created a barrier to open discussion regarding what a classroom may be.

When we go into schools, what is it that we expect to see? Hopefully we shall see a place that is full of a variety of activities with both students and teachers interacting, as teaching and learning are not static behaviours but are responses to a variety of social and material stimuli. In classrooms, learning activities occur as individual, small group, or whole class interactions. Watch an experienced teacher during the usual daily classroom interactions, and you may notice that, not only does s/he move through the space, making sure that materials are available when necessary, s/he also manipulates the environment in order to elicit particular responses from students and then uses these as feedback for reflection on their own practice.

This, however, is not empirical evidence. The teacher may be replicating the practice of peers, or of their previous teachers. They may also be unable to articulate the reasons for decisions made regarding the use of space. We are unable to make generalizable connections between intent, action and outcome without analysis. Though links between the use of space and student outcomes have been made (Blackmore, Bateman, O’Mara, Loughlin, & Aranda, 2011; DEECD, 2008) there is little rigorous investigation into of the nature of the relationship between pedagogy and the physical environment.
Whilst discussion regarding space has increased in intensity, especially as federal and state authorities finance the building of new schools, hoping to achieve ‘better’ outcomes for the nation’s students, the notion of the lineal ‘space’ of school timetables is one aspect of teaching that has not yet been fully appreciated. The authority of the timetable may override both pedagogical intent and the trajectory of learning, distorting the potential transformative nature of spatial change.

In order to develop a clearer view as to how teacher pedagogical practice and other organisational structures influence the new learning environments, I plan to investigate the environmental competencies (Lackney, 2008) of teachers, evaluating their use of these spaces. Such an investigation is required to encourage teachers to re-imagine both their expectations of how a classroom operates, and their pedagogical practice. In order for teachers to utilise the new environments successfully, they require empirical evidence that these spaces are effective for both teaching and learning. Without this evidence, there is a danger that they will embrace the classroom-as-container ethos, no matter the physical design.

Research trajectory three: expanding spaces - Ethel Villafranca

Taking students out of school and into informal learning environments, such as museums, zoos, aquaria, botanical gardens, and even theme parks, is an attempt at disrupting the classroom-as-container practice. However, educators carry their ‘imagined classroom’ on their back. They treat these out-of-school spaces as extensions of their classroom by behaving the same way, using the same classroom management, and employing the same teaching practices, schedule, and routine (Leander et al., 2010). Yet having an ‘imagined geography’ and a preconceived expectation on ‘when’ and ‘where’ learning takes place limits educators’ capacity to fully understand various ways learning happens, diminishing the educative value and potential of these alternative learning environments.

Museums are popular destinations for school field trips. That students learn in museums has been strongly established (Falk & Dierking, 1995, 1997; Hirzy, 1996; Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2006; McComas, 2006). Hooper-Greenhill (1991) notes an awareness among educators that museums should offer experiences that are different but complementary to the classroom. Hein and Alexander (1998) underscore “the power of museums to provide contexts for connections” (Hein & Alexander, 1998, p. 129) and help visitors arrive at that ‘eureka’ moment. Museums facilitate expansion of visitors’ worldviews by providing connections to disparate facts, ideas, and feelings (Falk, Dierking, & Holland, 1995). However, Lord (2007) asserts the value of the museum experience lies in its affective and transformative quality as this may result in a change in visitors’ attitudes, interests, appreciation, and beliefs.

The research focuses on evaluating effectiveness of university museums as a learning environment for tertiary level students. It will initially involve mapping out current student engagement levels and activities of university museums. My interest in this topic stems from my belief that university museums are in a strong position to create significant impact on student learning but are, unfortunately, underutilised as a valuable and readily available resource. University museums must take an active role in engaging students to expand their archaic function as repository of precious objects. I propose that resources be employed to remove barriers that restrain university museums from maximizing their potential as effective learning spaces.

The educative value of museums is traditionally evaluated through an assessment of their exhibitions and programs. Falk and Dierking (1992, 2013) advocate that the museum experience involves the interplay of three distinct contexts: decisions visitors make are “filtered through the personal context, mediated by the sociocultural context, and embedded within the physical context” (Falk & Dierking, 2013, p.30). They further add that the museum experience is gestalt and it starts with deciding to visit, going to the museum, viewing the galleries, conversing with people, eating, to purchasing items from the shop. This extends to post-visit discussions and when memories are triggered by certain words, images, events, or objects.

In light of this gestalt notion of the museum experience, I would like to explore the possibility of evaluating how the museum’s built environment facilitates learning beyond exhibitions and education programs. By drawing from both fields of museology and architecture, this study hopes to contribute to the reimagining of the space where learning in university museums happens to encompass areas beyond the galleries, lecture halls, and activity rooms. Considering the inherent nature of museums as an educational institution,
albeit an informal one, would it be possible to evaluate these in the same way that innovative learning spaces are assessed? What qualities of innovative and effective learning spaces can be adapted by university museums to make them more effective without losing its identity as a unique space for learning?

**Research trajectory four: unbundling spaces - Pamela Yang**

Research in understanding learning has always involved a notion of ‘where’ and ‘when’ learning is happening. In this paper we remap the traditional notion of a contained and ‘immobile’ classroom into a learning space that is multidisciplinary, dynamic, and expansive enough to fill the geographies and mobilities of learners today. This study moves away from a discussion of the construction and reconstruction of physical places to the formation of new virtual places, where arguments are made that such ‘cyberplaces’ are spaceless and placeless, nowhere and everywhere in nature (Kitchin, 1998).

According to Griffin, McGaw, and Care (2012), we are experiencing economic shifts on a global scale. Major shifts, along with the proliferation of the internet, changed people’s ways of thinking, living and working. Hence another set of skills on fostering generativity and creativity is needed to intersect the negotiation of social ‘space’ between physical and virtual places in life trajectories.

In addition, rapid technological innovation has facilitated an explosion of tools and media for learning in virtual spaces. Institutions continuously update their information technology infrastructures to accommodate learning that is not restricted to just one space and time. One mission of education today is to navigate these innovative spaces to help learners develop 21st century skills, including collaboration, creativity, communication and critical thinking (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 7).

Globally, there is competition and demand for innovative models of education. MOOCs have surfaced as one of the highest profile examples of a competing system. Purely virtual, this model of online learning disrupts geographic and economic barriers, challenging traditional notions of space and time. However, as low-completion rates and difficulties in assessing learning outcomes impede its widespread adoption across institutions, educators look to blended learning models for its transformational potential.

Blended learning is both simple and complex, and may be seen as ‘best of both worlds’. At its simplest, blended learning is an area of design and inquiry that combines face-to-face and online modalities (Bonk & Graham, 2006). As the scope of blended learning increases and the related research matures, more and more diverse voices have entered the conversation in attempt to define the field (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Wang, Fong, & Kwan, 2010). However, evidence still shows a lack of theoretical coherence among blended learning research, due in part to blended learning being a relatively new area of inquiry (Drysdale, Graham, Spring, & Halverson, 2013). Nonetheless, according to the NMC Horizon Report (2015) conducted by the University of Central Florida, blended approaches were most successful in ‘unbundling’ the classroom. It reported students felt online tools made instructors and content more accessible, but altogether, having been able to verbally converse ideas was what reinforced student motivation.

Despite blended learning having received recognition for its transformative potential in education (Dziuban, Moskal, & Hartman, 2005; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham & Robison, 2007), there is a need for more empirical and evaluative research to back up these optimistic claims. Researchers are still early in the development of sustainable assessment tools for blended learning environments to measure clarity, authenticity, unity, suspense (provoking learning motivation), depth, precision, sensitivity, proportion and overall flow in learning (Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison, in press).

Entering an exciting era for education, we are constantly experimenting with space and creating new opportunities to learn. However, in order to meet the demands of the 21st century, there is also critical need to introduce breakthroughs in evaluative methods that include elements that are informative, interactive, internet-based, interventionist, and provide instant feedback. Within this context, an argument can be made about mapping the new mobilities in learning, and that is: it is not bounded and will not hold still (Leander et al., 2010).
Conclusion

This paper set out to develop a theoretical orientation that would inform each author’s individual research trajectory. In the process it became apparent that educational research spaces could be seen as bounded and contained - much like classrooms. The studies themselves are bounded by their specific aims, intended outcomes, and our conceptions of what ‘good’ doctoral research looks like. Hence, we recognise the importance of not only seeking to reimagine the geographies of learning but also mapping this onto a reimaging of the geographies of educational research. By doing this, Leander et al. argue, we may “push open the boundaries of the enclosed classroom as dominant discourse and historically sedimented geography within educational research” (Leander et al., 2010, p. 330). The result is four heterogeneous research directions that seek to disrupt the bounded notion of the classroom while developing research practices that enable reconceptualisations of learning environment discourse. Collectively these nested and intersecting trajectories are a response to the immanent need for theoretically grounded research that will develop theory and practice in the emerging field of learning environment evaluation.
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