When one can’t see the wood for the trees! Education, training and learning and the metaphorical spaces of adult education discourse

Aideen Quilty, University College Dublin, Ireland

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That is indeed how metaphors work, as time-bombs or viruses or seeds or sleepers which, if activated, disseminated, sown or woken up at the right time, will blow up, catch on, take root or spring into action some time in the future, some time after the moment of their enunciation (Hebdige, 1993, pp.274).

Introduction

The lifelong learning discourse has, within an Irish context, variously come to include adult, continuing, professional education and training within and across the multiple contexts and spaces of higher education (HE), further education (FE), employment and state spheres. The connection between space and education and more specifically the notion of discourse as a spatial process drives this paper. By acknowledging adult education discourse as articulated through a myriad of educational spatial contexts and realities that represent a complex interplay between at the very least the physical, cerebral, aesthetic, virtual, metaphorical and human it allows for a re-imaging of the changing relationship between education, training and learning.

Despite some deliberate attempts to centralise spatial thinking vis-à-vis education theory and practice (SCUTREA Conference, 1999) there appears to be little sustained thinking in this area. I argue that by spatialising adult education discourse we can begin a process of critiquing current and imagining future adult education positions within the learning paradigm. One of the ways to stimulate this re-imagining is through playfulness with metaphor. A familiar strategy, it nonetheless offers a dynamic space within which dead or frozen education metaphors can be defrosted and idealised metaphors interrogated, leading us to a position of ‘wide-awakeness’ (Greene, 2003). From this awakened position we can imaginatively view current and future spaces of adult education at a time when the very relationships between education, training and learning are being remapped. It is this notion of remapping that captures my attention as I consider education metaphorically. Within the context of this paper, I propose to limit any exploration of this question to that of the spatial metaphor and specifically the metaphor of the map. This critical combination of the spatial and metaphorical will assist our interrogation of the changing relationship between education, training and learning as the borders across and between these three dimensions are paradoxically both blurred and more delineated and bounded than ever. I will return to this later.

Space is referred to as undergoing a renaissance, ‘space is now back on the map’ (Usher, 2002, pp.41). Whilst I argue that questions of space, of geography, should have a centre stage position within education theory and philosophy, simply importing, borrowing and embracing spatial metaphor does not in itself constitute such centrality. Indeed it could result in metaphorical overload of, and for, its own sake, as Lippard cautions, the terminology of place, of location has been applied so generally as to become locally meaningless:
Borders, boundaries, margins, peripheries, migrations and centres have become ubiquitous terms and are bandied about with little connection to lived experience (Lippard, 1997, pp.277).

Rather, such central spatial positionality within education should embrace a level of philosophical critique and intellectual excavation in relation to space and education as imbricated elements where questions of space, place, belonging, identity and power are seriously and centrally considered. One cannot deny, however, the presence of a fertile lexicon of the spatial metaphor within education. The University space is resplendent with spatial metaphor: we read of the ‘gates of the academy (Tett, 2007, pp.71); classrooms and schools continue to be ‘secret gardens…teaching staying within the four walls' (Connolly, 2007, pp.119); the ‘Ivory Tower’ is an often invoked metaphor to communicate an interpretation of University as exclusionary and privileged; the gatekeeper; the campus grounds, such powerful metaphors of exclusion, privilege and boundedness. It seems to me quite challenging to avoid invoking spatial metaphor within any consideration of adult education discourse and therefore incumbent upon us to both acknowledge this reality and to fully engage in its excavation.

**Why metaphor?**

It is useful at this juncture to reassert why metaphorical analysis has been employed across so many disciplines or arenas of enquiry. The first key reasons is that, especially since the late 1980s, it formed part of the growing critique of objectivism (Barnes and Duncan, 1992, pp.10) as subjectivity and multiple and unstable truths offered new avenues of thought. Geography, like the social sciences more generally, has adopted a key relationship with the metaphor. Given that one of the central concepts of geography is the highly contested, nuanced and complex concept of space, it is understandable that metaphors have been employed to try to make sense of and to communicate across such complexities. In this sense Lefebvre’s reference to metaphor as that which ‘erects a mental and social architecture above spontaneous life’ (1991, pp.140) begins to take shape and offer conceptual possibility.

Secondly, metaphor forms a bridge for understanding the development of theory, given that it touches a deep level of understanding (Barnes and Duncan, 1992, pp.10). McNay has suggested that ‘the use of a spatial metaphor to analyse experience complements and extends the discursive analysis of experience…discourse is a situated, rather than an abstract, medium where the situation itself is organised by invisible structures’ (2004, pp.185). Michael Curry, in a clever analysis of Wittgenstein, suggests that he addresses some of the central geographical questions about the role of space in philosophy, social theory, common sense and the importance of places… (2000, pp.90). Curry concludes his argument by saying that right at the heart of Wittgenstein’s work is a deep appreciation of the nature of places and their role in everyday lives, places created and maintained through the everyday practices of everyday life. In short he argues that Wittgenstein concretises the spatial metaphor:

> More than any other recent thinker, Wittgenstein managed to cut through the welter of spatial metaphors in which we live – level, scale, container, hierarchy – and see the extent to which all arise out of human life that is carried out in places (Curry, 2000, pp.110).

A third reason is that adopting metaphors from other disciplines can help overcome any tendency to dichotomise within our area of academic enquiry. Adopting the map from geography, as metaphor as opposed to object, I think allows significant possibility for re-
imagining and avoiding dichotomous analysis. This has a significant resonance within adult education, which can be in danger of entering into the language of binaries where either/or categories of traditional/non-traditional, full-time/part-time, further/higher, training/education, work-based/academic, theory/practice distinctions feature strongly.

A fourth use of metaphor and having particular resonance within adult education stems from the critical relationship between space and power in society. As Foucault states, ‘space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any form of power’ (1984, pp.252). Making explicit the relationship between social power and metaphor Smith, drawing heavily on Foucault, argues:

Not only is the production of space an inherently political process, then, but the use of spatial metaphors, far from providing just an innocent if evocative imagery, actually taps directly into questions of social power (Smith, 1993, pp.97).

There is a distinctive mixture of wider and more local social relations within space, relations that interact with and take elements from the accumulated history of a place. Taking Massey’s (1994; 2005) idea of space as constituted out of social relations and place as a particular articulation of those relations, we can begin to locate or map the places of adult education discourse and critique its empty spaces and absences. Of course lifelong learning discourse gains articulation in a multiplicity of spaces and places and the spaces of education, training, learning vis-à-vis adults are not uniform, even if they overlap. Within the space of lifelong learning as training the places of its articulation can broadly include the workplace, FE Colleges and TEIs through their continuing professional education programmes. Within the latter one could predict discursive spaces emphasising, for example, the knowledge economy, performance, applied knowledge, quality assurance and professional collaboration, with absences in relation to such tenets of adult education philosophy and practice as civil society, critical thinking, knowledge as transformation.
A cautionary note!

We must be consistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life (Soja, 1997, pp.242).

Lest we get carried away on the potential tide of metaphorical excess some cautionary points should be noted. One of the dangers inherent in metaphorical analysis is the assumption that any metaphor can be fully representative, resulting in a tendency to objectivise or to end up within an imprisoned state due to a failure to fully recognise that ‘metaphor always provides a partial vision, a particular perspective’ (Hepple, 1992, pp.142). In this way metaphors serve both to illuminate and to shadow. However of importance here is the acknowledgement that the strategic silences of the metaphor are as important as those thrust centre-stage in both languages and vision. What is invisible therefore in our education discourse is of equal importance to that which is being mapped as policy, procedure, philosophy etc. For example, within the OECD, the knowledge economy is the discursive map onto which its policy work is located. The inherent assumption of this ‘economic map’, that it offers the most legitimate and broadly representative vision of lifelong learning, needs to be interrogated and the shadows and partial vision it generates revealed and critiqued.

Greene and Griffiths (2003) have argued that sometimes metaphors run out of steam and become frozen or dead, a concept mirrored by Barnes et al. (1992, pp.11) who suggest that once metaphors take on a habitual use they become dead. Their powerfulness however can survive beyond this metaphoric dead state as either they become fossilised, no longer a source of creative thought but still capable of influencing our intellectual visions and our social lives - dead as metaphors but still very oppressive as mental prisons – or they are replaced by new metaphors or perspectives (1992, pp.142-143). I suggest that the metaphor of the Map as applied to education contexts can be considered in this dualistic manner; having entered this ‘dead-like’ state it can have the effect of entrenching us intellectually.

I wonder if that is not what has happened in relation to the ‘mapping’ activities currently within the Irish education context. Unfortunately one such example can be seen in the ongoing process within Ireland of ‘mapping to the frame’ qualifications at a pre degree level i.e. Certificates and Diploma programme awards, the frame in this case being the Irish NQF (National Qualifications Framework). Such ‘mapping’ suggests agency, somebody ‘doing this mapping’ and serves to mask quite strategically the reality that this process is still ongoing and on-going. A possible interpretation is that taking its strength from the traditional, lengthy process of map making, where attention to detail was all important, and fixing positions about offering legitimacy, this process is allowed to continue uncritically, despite the absence of any real evidence of progress. This reflects a sense of being imprisoned within this mapping process, without adequate sense of who is mapping, for what purpose and to what end? The map as metaphor in this case confers strength and legitimacy to a process which without real conclusions or outcomes affects adult learners, and non-traditional or access students, in a disproportionate manner, making it increasingly difficult for these students to ‘map’ their own pathways through the frame or to be secure in the currency of their programmes. In this context the metaphor seems to be running away with itself suggesting a certain lack of control regarding the way that spatial metaphors have become to be used. From an initial function which served very positively to challenge and aerate, Smith suggests that such metaphors may now have taken on a degree of independent existence that they start to discourage fresh, political insight (1993,
pp.97-98). Whither then such fresh insight?

Cognitive mapping and art as inspiration:

I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars (Borges, Garden of Forking Paths, 1941).

One possibility of challenging the traditional positivist assumptions contained within ‘the map’ and instead harnessing its imaginative power and potential is through a consideration of cognitive mapping. Though Davidson’s (1999) application of cognitive mapping to the multiple roles, challenges, identities the adult student encounters within their journey offers an interesting insight into the usefulness of the mapping metaphor, I am more interested in what might be revealed when applied to education discourse and policy. The notion of cognitive mapping I am drawn to resembles that of the borderless mental mapping characteristic of the work of artist Franz Ackermann. Thomas (2005, pp.11) observes that Ackermann examines the question of how technologies penetrate social interactions within particular places. This prompts a similar line of questioning vis-à-vis education spatial discourse: We could ask how education discourse of lifelong learning penetrates adult educational practice within the spaces and places of the university. Social space is vast and complex encompassing not one but ‘a multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces’ (Lefebvre, 1991, pp.86). As such it is, as Lefebvre suggests, impossible to map in a traditional cartographic manner given that it is not only the map’s legend that is liable to change, but also the objects represented, the lens through which they are viewed and the scale used (1991, pp.85-86).

I consider the critique put forward by Harley (1992) nearly 15 years ago, that maps are too important to be left to cartographers alone to be an important one. Whilst Harley writes from ‘within’ the discipline of geography it prompts several questions in relation to education. Who are the adult education discourse cartographers within the TEIs (Tertiary Education Institutions), or put differently, who authors discourses within our Institutions? (Quilty, pp.2008). These questions are increasingly important as we in Ireland, as in Europe, are undergoing a re-mapping of tertiary education. We hear of the ‘changing landscape’, a ‘re-mapping of the terrain’. Interesting metaphors, however, in the very first instance surely it is incumbent upon us to ask: who is doing this mapping? In engaging imaginatively with this vision of the ‘new landscape’ and within its creation, I think we can draw on the potential of the map as possibly the quintessential spatial metaphor. Herod (2003, pp.229-248) offers an excellent account of the human geographers’ post-positivist concern with metaphor as a powerful shaper of how we understand things. The Map, for so long a major symbol of this stronghold positivist, objectivist geographic tradition, has now come to be deconstructed from the inside out by challenging the conceptual vacuum between cartography and human geography (Harley, 1992). This disciplinary deconstruction offers those ‘outside’ the discipline a great possibility as adult education cartographers to re-imagine and re-map our discourse in visual, symbol, aesthetic, fluid, subjective form.

Adult education discourse inevitably involves questions of access and exclusion. ‘Access’ a concept central to adult, continuing and community education theory, is a term heavily imbued with the language of the spatial. Access within adult education suggests movement, presupposes the desire to be within, to gain access; it suggests negotiation, the sense that it is not guaranteed, the possibility that it could be denied; access codes, keys, inside information. Access also suggests people, particular people, those doing the
accessing, those facilitating and preventing such activity. Inherently spatial, it is also dynamic and as such poses problems in attempting to ‘map’ such activities. It could be argued that traditional interpretations of ‘mapping’ as a verb or noun and utilised within various policy contexts, add to the exclusivity of the map, limiting the representation to those desiring or capable of maintaining fixed positions or locations within a field.

I argue that by explicitly spatialising this discourse we can focus on where adult education, exclusion, philosophy, pedagogy, policy, happens and is resisted, where it is encouraged and embraced and where it is colonised. Further by posing the question ‘where’, we succeed in placing the institutions, their walls and campus and systems and structures, like a living organism, under the investigative research lens. This is critical. In focusing the investigative lens on the Educational Institution, a clear statement is communicated regarding the acknowledgement of power relations inherent within any discourse. Further it acknowledges the multiplicity of players within any discursive formulation, not least of which the institution itself. Ryan states:

If on the other hand, the problem is located in the system, then the focus of attention shifts away from ‘…integrating deficient people…’ (Crowther et al., 2000, pp.179) and towards identifying the deficiencies of the system (Ryan, 2007, pp.137).

Conclusion

Considering lifelong discourse in a changing spatial context where education, training and learning are being remapped raises several questions: can this metaphoric mapping process help us position ourselves as practitioners, researchers, educators of, and with, adults in a time of extreme change within the HE system? Can it help us identify as Foucault would argue, not those involved in the discourses, rather the spaces of origin? Where does this discourse come from a, ‘discourse, which has its own dominant metaphors that both facilitate and limit knowledge and insights’? (Barnes, 1992, pp.139). How is it circulated and what place does it provide for possible subjects: for speakers and listeners? (Foucault, 1984, pp.119-120).

Ackermann inspires us potential cartographers of discourse towards a re-imagining of the adult education map in all its forms. If any discourse is characterised by a spatial multiplicity it is that of adult education where the walls which bound its practice are as fluid as Ackermann’s currents. A polyphonic creation in process it is a discourse often striking discordant tones. Surely then it requires a multiplicity of maps, cartographers, interpreters, musicians, artists, learners, thinkers in order to both give voice and critique its overlapping and simultaneously distinct forms. Our challenge is perhaps to continue to excavate and critique the somewhere-ness of a spatially diverse lifelong learning discourse so that we can always see the wood for the trees!

References


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