Communities of Enquiry as a Third Space: Exploring Theory and Practice

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Introduction

The SUPER network is pre-eminently a community of enquiry. There have been some changes in membership and shifts in emphases but the enduring purpose is to engage in collaborative research and to learn from that process. The aim is to learn from research and about research. Our understanding of the term community of enquiry is predicated on the notion of a social rather than an individual view of learning. Learning takes place through shared experiences and in dialogue with others. Meaning-making occurs through practice within a community comprised of individuals who share a common purpose (Wenger, 1998). That purpose gives shape to the practice and the forms of knowledge that are shared between the group members. The practice is bounded by the relationships and interactions between members and develops from the motivation inherent in their shared purpose. Such practice has been defined as ‘a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance, and accountability’ (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002:38) Relationships and identity are key components. We are interested to learn how theories of a third space can illuminate the work of our community of enquiry.

The concept of a third space has emerged for us in an attempt to articulate the complex dynamic and practice that results from collaboration. In a conference paper written two years ago, a study of the SUPER network provoked theories about the
micro-politics of school-university partnerships and included commentary on the nature of understanding different cultures and crossing borders.

In the partnerships in which we have been involved the vehicle for crossing borders from the university to the school has often been via the role of critical friend. This role has been the focus of attention in many research studies but when looked at through a micro-political lens it can be seen to be a highly demanding one that will inevitably involve conflict, border crossing, power and ideology.

(Baumfield and McLaughlin, 2007)

At last year’s BERA keynote lecture, Zeichner spoke of the usefulness of a theory of third space to imagine the transformation of practice resulting from forms of teacher-university collaborations. We found this an evocative term that promised the possibility of helping us to think more radically about collaborative practice in a community of enquiry. We know communities of enquiry to be complex entities in which issues of identity and power are key. They are relational and focussed on learning. How might a study of third space theory help to illuminate such an entity?

Our review methodology is described as follows. Firstly, we systematically searched key bibliographic online databases (e.g. ERIC, BREI, AEI) with variations on the following terms: ‘third space’ and ‘school university partnerships’. We also opportunistically searched Google and followed up references within key documents and presentations (e.g. Zeichner’s BERA 2008 address). Search results, including electronic copies of articles where available, were initially captured and stored by one colleague using Zotero and then shared with the research team. Items were also tagged and stored in an online Delicious account in order to facilitate sharing of links and references amongst the team. Close scrutiny of items (e.g. of abstracts) from the initial search led to many being rejected as not directly relevant to our focus. A notable finding was that few items were identified as discussing ‘third space’ explicitly in terms of school-university partnerships. However, we were able to draw upon a range of accounts of research in which the idea of a third space had proved useful either as inspiration or as a heuristic device to help illuminate understanding of processes at work.
In this paper we explore theories of third space and review the different ways in which researchers and teachers have used the concept. We consider the extent to which it is a useful concept to help us understand, analyse and articulate the work of the SUPER network as a community of enquiry.

**Theoretical Resonance: Third Space, Hybridty, Borderlines**

The term Third Space emerged in the work of H.K Bhabha from a consideration of power and identity within society in the postmodern, postcolonial era. In particular, it was an imagining of a cultural space that gave voice to minority people and acknowledged the hybridity of cultures in defiance of ethnocentric traditions. There is an emphasis on the existence of differing cultural conditions and historical narratives and the importance of not simply acknowledging and valuing them, but interrogating how they can be properly understood. Bhabha writes of ‘the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity’ and of a ‘Third Space of enunciations’ (1994:56). He seeks a more nuanced understanding of diversity and asserts that such an ‘enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the binary division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and authoritative address’ (1994:35). Moreover, the Third Space is transformative. The cultural hybridity represented in the Third Space is conceptualised in terms of the ‘borderline conditions’ that exist there. It is a space peculiar to itself, that is not simply the space between or the sum of different cultures, but a space where the enunciation of cultures is a transformative, emancipatory act. He urges the acknowledgement of ‘a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation’ (1994:10) and suggests that ‘by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves’ (1994:56). In this way the idea of a Third Space seems to lend itself aptly to studies of situations in which different cultures may conflict, converge or transform. The denial of the simplicity of binaries towards an appreciation of complexity and hybridity reflects the richness and diversity typical within communities of enquiry.

The conceptualisation of a Third Space with ‘borderline conditions’ (Bhabha 1994:9) emphasises the sense of alienation, of crossing over, and travel. It is evocative of the challenges faced by foreigners and the requirements of seeing somewhere as a stranger. This was a prominent feature in the work of Paulo Freire who has been
described as a ‘border intellectual’ (Giroux 2006:287). Friere wrote extensively about crossing borders both literally and metaphorically. He was sensitised to issues of foreignness, oppression and emancipation and the attendant issues of language and identity.

He constantly re-examined and raised questions about what kind of borders are being crossed and re-visited, what kind of identities are being made and refigured within new historical, social and political borderlands, and what effects such crossings have for redefining pedagogical practice.

(Giroux, 2006: 290)

This work has influenced ideas of border crossing that illuminate complexities experienced by people co-existing in a world with shifting political, social and cultural conditions. A border crosser has been defined as ‘a person moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power’ (Giroux, 2006:51) In this context it seems that borders can be physical or cultural and that border territory is a place, real or imagined, in which ‘maps of knowledge, social relations, and values are increasingly being negotiated and re-written’ (Giroux, 2006:51). This is illustrative of the possible challenges faced within communities of enquiry where individuals bring differing expectations, norms of behaviour and professional practice, such as that comprised of school and university colleagues.

Ideas about a third space have inspired research and exploration in many fields, including geography, education and drama (Richardson Bruna 2009:225). It typically resonates with workers seeking social justice and the advancement of disadvantaged groups. We explore below some ways in which the idea has influenced pedagogical approaches and ways of conceptualising identity and collaboration.

**Border Pedagogy: Identity, Agency and Voice**

There are several examples in the literature of the influence of the idea of a third space on pedagogical practice (Emdin, 2009, Richardson Bruna, 2009, Barton and Tan, 2009, Adams et al, 2008). In each case the work described is aimed at some form of advancement of the expression or agency of the young people concerned. In addition, attention is paid to their historical and cultural narratives and the influences that shape them.
The chief goal in this article is to bring under-discussed dynamics that directly impact teaching and learning to light, so that they may illuminate the realities of urban students’ experiences and positively impact their engagement in science.

(Emdin, 2009)

Cultural hybridity is a common theme and the pedagogical approaches are designed to counter hegemonies and encourage the enunciation of other cultural influences. One article takes the form of a discussion between respondents who are all science teachers from Mozambique, Nepal and the Caribbean respectively. They are invited to ‘explore their autobiographies to reveal core cultural values and beliefs grounded in their non-Western traditions and worldviews’ (Adams et al., 2008:999) The enquiry is founded on the understanding that:

Despite the cultural hybridity of these countries, science education is disconnected from the daily lives of the majority of their populations, serving inequitably the academic Western-oriented aspirations of an elite group who are living hybridity but talking scientism.

(Adams et al., 2008:999)

A third space is often understood as a location for exploring issues of dominance, power and emancipation. It is a means to imagine new ways of working, new ways of talking and original, transformative ways of relating. It is a post-structural means to contain radical ideas and practice. It makes hybrid forms of culture pre-eminent. Some writers describe the spaces as hybrid spaces and focus on the ‘creation of hybrid spaces that rely upon cultural knowledge and experience to shape and transform academic knowledge (Barton and Tan, 2009: 50) The third space has been conceptualised as a metaphysical location for critical engagement (Routledge, 1996). In this research endeavour, the third space was imagined as an active site where identities could be blurred, mindsets altered all in ‘attempt to live theory in the immediate’ (Routledge, 1996: 401).

So conceptualising a transformative, permissive third space has helped researchers to express ideas and enact practices for emancipation and enunciation. Communities of enquiry are typically populated by individuals and groups of disparate knowledge, experiences and confidence. Issues of power and the locus of control are inherent in
the dynamics of collaboration and become important to consider and study. The structural arrangements and purposes inherent in the practices can help clarify when the control and dominance is a matter of power enacted over, or of responsibilities being wrought to. The idea of working in a third space that is a location for transformation and emancipation might help us challenge norms of dominance and accepted patterns of discourse and collaboration.

**Exploring Identity**

The idea of a third space has been used to express the culmination of a journey towards the finding of an identity and the forming of a sense of self. (Wang, 2004) In this account, the author describes her struggles as a Chinese woman living in the United States and charts her progress to gaining a more assured sense of self through an analysis of Eastern and Western philosophies and poetry. She writes about ‘curriculum in a third space’ and describes her conceptualisation of a third space as a reflection of the complexities of her experiences. Reviewing her own work three years later, Wang is clear about the enduring concept of a third space.

This third does not reach consensus or synthesis but moves between, beyond and with the dual forces simultaneously. It indicates the continual birth of a certain newness along the way in a never-ending process which is circular rather than linear. I cannot emphasise enough that a third space is unsettling and never settles down. The third is not another version of the unified one but holds both unity and multiplicity.

(Wang 2007:390)

This illuminates the potential for the idea of a third space to encompass complexity and dynamism. The notion of a third space affords boundaries to a territory that is itself fluid, flexible and multi-layered. It is not simply a place for the sum of others or for a merger between differences. Rather it is a place for transformation and creativity and it helps to illustrate the newness of what is created.

In a more straightforward account, the idea of a third space is used to explore the ways in which university staff may be seen to shift identities and develop alternative professional practices (Whitchurch, 2008). This is interesting because it describes a world of work in which there is increasing complexity and a blurring of boundaries. The author offers a view of the working landscape in which roles are altered. For
example, administrative staff are beginning to work with school colleagues and academic staff participating together in joint projects requiring new practices, skills and modes of behaviour. She describes professionals who have a flexible attitude to their role and identity and writes about the spaces that they occupy to perform new roles and tasks. The terms ‘bounded professionals, cross-boundary professionals and unbounded professionals are each ascribed to the workers with differing approaches and dispositions. The new configurations of teams work in a third space, which may be a real space or a virtual space. The unbounded professionals working in this third space use ‘organic imagery to describe this process of joint working, seeing the building of communicative relationships and networks as more significant than the observance of organisational boundaries’ (Whitchurch, 2008: 386). These are ‘third space professionals’.

The roles and identities of all participants in the SUPER community of enquiry are increasingly multi-layered and multi-dimensional. School colleagues working as teacher-research co-ordinators (TRCs) have multiple roles in school and speak eloquently about the development of their roles leading research in their institutions. They also have become increasingly involved with researching the processes of research in collaboration with university colleagues. University colleagues working in this project have roles of researchers, critical friends, tutors and supervisors. All participants are having to blur boundaries and become less bounded professionals. It is evident that building communicative relationships and working jointly are crucial aspects to the collaboration and valued highly within the community. It will be worthwhile exploring this dimension in self-conscious, reflexive study together.

**Learning as boundary crossing in a school-university partnership**

There are few accounts in the literature of school-university partnerships and the work that ensues. One account we did review described a partnership between university and schools for the advancement of teacher education (Tsui and Law, 2007). This was different to the SUPER network because it was not focussed on research and was clearly a service model, in which the university was the provider of education for new and experienced teachers. The dynamic was hierarchical. However, the authors researched the process of teaching and learning within the partnership and used the
concepts of boundary crossing and third space to describe the learning process and the learning outcomes. The concept of crossing boundaries helped them to focus on the challenges of cross-cultural work and the possible conflicts that may ensue.

Boundaries are often seen as sources of potential difficulties. However, they also afford opportunities for innovation and renewal. Crossing boundaries forces participants to take a fresh look at their long-standing practices and assumptions, and can be a source of deep learning’ (Tsui and Law, 2007: 1290).

They used the idea of a third space to conceptualise the learning that took place ‘when ideas from different cultures meet and form new meanings (Tsui and Law, 2007: 1290). These researchers used ‘activity theory’ (Engestrom, 2001) to model the process and partnership was the activity system they described. Lesson study was the ‘boundary tool’ used to construct opportunities for discussion and new learning and they collected data from observations of the participants at work. They were positive about the outcomes, describing the struggles and discourse between participants as enactments of conflicts within the boundary zone. They concluded that participants had demonstrated ‘the capability to engage in expansive learning by tackling ill-defined problems through crossing community boundaries and collaborating with members of other communities of practice’ (Tsui and Law, 2007: 1300)

This proves a useful lens through which to consider the comparative experiences within the SUPER community of enquiry. Our work is more fluid and the processes more flexible. We do have structures such as meetings, specific roles and responsibilities, joint activities and events that help shape and frame the work. These are not fixed or rigid and are not readily understood as tools. Our model is of a process shaped by purpose, dialogue and relationships and not matched by a straightforward service model. However, the analysis of conflict resolution in the third space and of new learning as boundaries are crossed is very resonant.

Other theoretical resonances: Bourdieu

Through our study of third space and ideas of place and activity we were drawn to the work of Bourdieu and his concepts of habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1980). We wanted to understand more fully what was implied by these concepts and to consider if they could help to illuminate our analyses of our work. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus,
capital and field are inter-related and inter-dependent. He analysed the social interactions, events and cultural practices in society and described components of those interactions three-fold. The social space for interactions is the field. A field can be likened to a pitch for playing a game or a field of forces. Habitus refers to an individual’s dispositions and history and what each individual brings to the interaction. Habitus both shapes the interaction and is shaped by the interaction. Capital refers to the individual’s place within the field. It can take different forms, such as economic, cultural, social or symbolic. Habitus and capital act together within any given field and this creates the particular practice. It is this relational aspect that is vital.

Both habitus and field are relational structures and it is the relation between these relational structures that provides the key for understanding practice (Maton, 2008: 57).

Bourdieu’s work has been described as ‘a scholastic device, an epistemological and methodological heuristic, which helps researchers to devise methods to make sense of the world’ (Thomson, 2008:74). We find it useful to attend to habitus as a concept to illuminate the importance of an individual’s dispositions and history. It focuses attention on the ways in which an individual shapes the interaction and is shaped by it. However, it is the significance of the relational element in Bourdieu’s analysis that is most important for our work. He encourages researchers to go ‘beyond surface empirical practices’ and to consider the underlying dynamic between, within and beyond the individuals relating together (Maton, 2008). This is an element that is understated in much of the work within third space theory. However, similarly to third space theory Bourdieu’s work goes beyond dichotomies and emphasises the complexities of social interaction and collaborative practices.

**Reflexivity in the Third Space**

The work of Bourdieu is also significant in the way that he emphasised the dynamic of the researcher’s social relationship to the field of study. This is particularly relevant to our work in which we are part of the process under scrutiny. This is in part self-study, with all the attendant challenges and partiality inferred. It is essential that we practice a sensitivity to the field of action, whether that be as researchers or critical
friends. We must practice ‘situated understanding’ and stress the importance of reflexivity. This has itself been ascribed the potential quality of transformation.

Individual researchers must be reflexive, but the field must also recognize and reward reflexivity as part of the process of mutual transformation. When researchers think in these terms and work in these ways, they by definition transform the structure of the research field itself.

(Grenfell and James, 1998:181)

It is powerful to think of working in the field of dynamic social interactions in which the participants bring dispositions and history that shape those interactions and are, in turn, shaped by them. It is valuable to emphasise the importance of researcher reflexivity and to consider it a quality inherent to the work. The use of third space theory to inspire and illuminate a focus on issues of power, identity, transformation and boundary crossing has proven interesting and is reinforced by a study of the literature. Third spaces have been identified metaphorically and actually to be locations for transformative, emancipatory practice in which boundary crossing leads to the formation of new learning and new identities. In the final section of this paper below, we discuss the extent to which the SUPER community of enquiry can be said to have the characteristics of a third space.

**The SUPER network as a third space**

The analysis of data and reflexive exposition is ongoing and partial, but our early studies detailed in this symposium, suggest that there is evidence of new learning and a blurring of boundaries for roles and identities. Boundaries are being crossed in different spaces and in a variety of ways. They are increasingly being crossed in a self-conscious and reflective manner that has the potential to accentuate and accelerate the process. It is less clear at this stage how transformative are the practices and new meanings. It is also unclear how learning is distributed, particularly between the school and university colleagues comparatively. The balance of leadership and control formed by structures and the purposes of the enquiry lead to conflicting perspectives on power.

Using third space theory and the work of Bourdieu is important for self-conscious study of the complex dynamic that is collaboration in a community of enquiry. Focussing on cultural differences and challenges inherent in crossing boundaries is a
useful way to think about the forms of interactions and types of knowledge. The idea of a third space has immediate resonance and has been adopted readily for different constituents to think about the work and their experiences within the community. This alone would render the idea useful. It is an idea both permissive and invitational, encouraging creative, radical thinking, denying the simplicity of binaries and valuing hybridity as a normal component of a disparate grouping. This is arguably a necessary starting point for an analysis of a complex, relational collaboration.

What is missing from the framework and what has been underplayed thus far is the significance of relationships. The work of Bourdieu helps to emphasise the relational dynamic and the complex, crystalline nature of that dynamic. It is difficult to capture in the discourse of a series of meetings and any analysis by researcher participants is inevitably fraught with subjective and emotional resonance with the power to distort. The SUPER network has existed for many years. It has evolved and developed over time due to a combination of factors interplaying together, including the powerful forces of personal motivation, trust and relationships. Membership has altered and different participants know alternate histories and bring different perspectives. In a community of enquiry with a focus on learning, ‘context matters…. factors such as where a community is located, the culture that surrounds it, the way it gets started, and its conditions of membership combine to impact the trajectories it takes and the challenges it faces’ (Lieberman and Miller, 2008: 97). The SUPER network has flexible, relational structures that have seen it change shape but never break. Our analyses must endeavour to focus on the relational aspects as well as the individual. Reflexivity must become a stronger element for all participants and between participants. Discourse must be balanced and purposeful, allowing for the enunciation of hybrid narratives. In these ways the SUPER network has the potential to be a third space that is a transformative site for learning and practice.
References


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