Geography matters: promoting an international spatial, educational community

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Introduction

The issue of the conceptualisation of space is of more than technical interest; it is one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualise the world. (Massey, 2004, p251)

It is increasingly acknowledged that how we come to know and understand is intimately tied to relational, spatial formations. Thus, as new, familiar and doggedly old lifelong learning and equity of access issues present themselves for interrogation and explication, the spatial contexts within which such issues emerge take on an even greater significance. We can interrogate what such ‘spatial formations’ might mean for us, and offer to us, within education by drawing on education’s rich and lengthy tradition of inter-disciplinarity. Looking beyond what Lawn and Furlong call ‘the four foundation disciplines of the earlier period’ (2009, p550) sociology, philosophy, psychology and history I turn to geography to fuel my interrogative lens. In short, I take as a starting point the idea that geography matters for education. I believe that in order to maximise the potential for how we understand the educational world, a world of increasing complexity and elasticity, we must continue to develop a geographical educational spatial landscape. Speaking to the conference theme of how international collaboration can lead to more creative understandings about teaching and research, this paper explores how we might support the international collaborations and emerging communities of practice within the interdisciplinary space between geography and education.

In order to promote this position I suggest that ‘storytelling’ or our autoethnographic writings offer much creative potential for how we might come to see, know and understand better the interdisciplinary world. Stories help us to make connections with other people across cultures, continents and contexts. Such ‘stories’ can be located broadly within qualitative methodology drawing on the rich tradition of social justice movements of the 1960s. More specifically we can position them within the context of autoethnography, an emergent method which Hesse-Biber and Leavy argue ‘disrupt traditional ways of knowing, such as positivism, in order to create rich new meanings’ (2006, pxii). Before exploring the potential for such ‘stories’ I will address briefly the claim that geography matters.
Geography Matters

A central argument throughout this paper is that our knowledge and understanding of educational access and equity requires us to know something of their spatial realities and characteristics. And I am not the first person to argue for this particular disciplinary fusion where we actively set out to mine the geographical terrain, its concepts, theories, methods, as it relates to, and impacts upon, education theory and philosophy. There is much to guide us in this work. The not insignificant attraction of the spatial within the human sciences, particularly since the 1990s, and the renewed interest in recent years, has resulted in volumes of work being generated on how the spatial might be interpreted in an informed manner beyond the discipline of geography. As Blunt observes:

More than ever before, scholars working in other disciplines in the humanities are thinking and writing in explicitly spatial terms, most notably in terms of imaginative geographies and the multiple and contested spaces of identity, which are often articulated through spatial images such as mobility, location, borderlands, exile, home. (Blunt, 2007, pp75-6)

Such thinking can be seen to reflect a broader ‘spatial turn’ or the importation of geographical terms and concepts into, and across, a host of other disciplinary areas (see McDowell, 1999; Blunt, 2007; Crang & Thrift, 2003; Hubbard et al, 2005). There is evidence too that the ‘spatial turn’ has certainly not bypassed education theorising and scholarship. The literature surrounding what I term ‘Geographies of Education’ (Quilty, 2010) suggests the emergence, albeit fractured and in process, of an education spatial consciousness across a global landscape of intellectual engagement spanning Australia, America, Europe, Great Britain and Ireland. There are examples of new and emerging spaces, new rooms, openings and portals as researchers seek to explore and expand this educational spatial landscape. There are those who, like me especially over the past decade, have been quite charmed by Geography (see Gulson and Symes (2010); Kitchens (2009); Taylor, (2009); Savin-Baden (2008); Edwards and Usher (2008); Burke and Jackson (2007); Gulsen, (2006); Youdell (2006); Armstrong (2003); McConaghy (2006); Gruenewald (2003); Quinn (2003); Burke, (2002).

This ‘turn’ offers many possibilities associated with the cross-fertilisation of ideas and analysis so characteristic of interdisciplinarity. As somebody holding a position across the disciplinary worlds of Women’s Studies, Equality Studies, Education and Social Justice, such possibilities take on great significance. Hesse-Biber and Leavy discuss how inter-disciplinarity pertains to emerging research methods and suggest that the researcher so located may be required to engage at the borders, to work from a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary position. They note:

Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective is often a process in which one becomes both an insider and outsider – taking on a multitude of different
standpoints and negotiating these identities simultaneously. (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006, pxii)

William Pinar captures something of this process of disciplinary engagement or fusion through his notion of ‘complicated conversations,’ an idea I find both attractive and in practice extremely demanding. He suggests that ‘a complicated conversation’ illustrates a curriculum in which academic knowledge, subjectivity and society are inextricably linked’ (2004, p11). It is my argument that geography has the capacity to do exactly this, to offer educationalists an additional set of tools, ideas and concepts through which knowledge, subjectivity and society can be interrogated in a powerful way. And yet such collaboration is demanding. As Taylor argues, despite the spatial turn within education there are very few formal sites of production or dissemination within journals, research networks etc. as a consequence of which ‘it can be difficult for academic practitioners who work at the interface between education and geography to consider themselves as a coherent community of practice’ (2009, p657). However, it is clear that, reflecting the broader intellectual and academic landscape, such communities are central to the rigorous and sustained pursuit of these spatial ideas as they apply to, and promote creative understandings of, equity and access issues at the local, national and international levels. I contend that stories offer a powerful tool to educationalists seeking to establish, and contribute to, existing intellectual communities of interest in the interdisciplinary space between education and geography.

Stories Matter

Your context - your location in the world - shapes your view of the world and therefore what you see as important, as worth knowing; context shapes the theories/stories you concoct of the world to describe and explain it. (Hanson, cited in Hubbard et al., 2005, p5)

Drawing on my experiences of creating and living ‘in place’, as a woman and feminist, coupled with an academic past immersed in education and influenced by geography, I found myself writing stories. These stories represent the result of the knowledge gained from the conversation I have been having as an educationalist with geography, with its ideas and concepts, its authors and practitioners. And yet, as Burke and Jackson remind us, such knowledge is partial:

Academic knowledge is partial because it excludes experiences of marginalised identities, but it is also distorted when those who produce knowledge fail to recognise their own social/cultural/historic locations. (2007, p113)

Thus, it is important to acknowledge that I as author, am not a neutral participant within any research or writing process, a point succinctly captured by Graham who tells us that ‘theories are imaginaries, creations of the human imagination, and constitutive of the way we understand the world’ (2006, p269). This is clearly a challenging position. Within our research and writing, such subjective positioning
means that ‘our knowledge of the world is always mediated and interpreted from a particular stance and an available language, and that we should own up to this in explicit ways’ (Cousin, 2010, p10). I, like all research participants am ‘entrenched in the historical, geographical, political, personal, economic, psychological and social dynamics of the moment, shaping my interpretations, perceptions and ways of knowing’ (Burke, 2002, p40). Autoethnography offers a methodological approach from which to capture both the subjective influences and constituting factors on my professional experiences as an illuminating and interrogative tool.

Autoethnography
Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) offer an excellent, succinct account of autoethnography as having developed out of a tradition of using auto/biographical detail within the qualitative research process. They suggest that in general terms we can understand autoethnography as ‘a method of oral history in which the researcher becomes his or her own subject’ where researchers ‘use their own thoughts, feelings and experiences as a means of understanding the social world or some aspect of it’ (2006, pxxii). Reed-Danahy’s work on autoethnography reflects a similar point. Commenting on her contribution to the field in the late 1990s she notes she ‘adopted a broad perspective that identifies autoethnography as a genre of writing that, at minimum, places the author’s lived experience within a social and cultural context’ (2009, p30). Importantly, she identifies autoethnography as an umbrella term that may include three broad areas: the first two she describes as ‘autobiographical narratives about the doing of ethnography’ and ‘anthropologists doing ethnography in their own society.’ However, the third she describes as ‘the work of people without anthropological training or people in other fields like literature who write with an ethnographic sensibility about their own cultural milieu’ (2009, pp30-31). The latter resonates with the approach I have taken. And yet these stories are located and presented within a formal academic and intellectual context and thus must address the criticism of autoethnographic writing as ‘self-indulgent, or narcissistic, or lacking in method or validity, or too literary and not theoretical enough’ (Davies et al., 2004, p361). Acknowledging such criticisms Spry suggests that the writing must be well crafted and respected by literature critics and social scientists. It must be emotionally engaging as well as critically self-reflexive of one’s socio-political activity. Finally, she argues that it should not simply be a confessional tale of self-renewal, she says ‘the researcher and text must make a persuasive argument, tell a good story (Spry, 2006, p191).

Indeed, Spry (2006), speaking to the importance of reflexive, self-narratives, and the courage required to be vulnerable in rendering scholarship, calls on us ‘to step out from behind the curtain and reveal the individual at the controls of academic-Oz’ (2006, p192). In my desire to reveal the controls of my personal academic Oz, autoethnography offered much potential, a potential I invite you to share as we encounter a story which comes directly from my subjective, professional, experienced history.
Story Vignette: ‘Kitchen Choice’

Picture the scene. Driving, we have just left behind the bamboo planted, award winning, architecturally designed, concrete, campus of UCD, University College Dublin. Behind, I have left my office, located within the University Library Building, within the School of Social Justice, within the College of Human Sciences. On my desk a collage of photos of my Father. Driving South West we soon also leave behind the greenery, the plush and distinctly middle-class aesthetic, representative of much of south county Dublin. We pass Dundrum Shopping Centre, symbol of all the excesses and consumerism that characterised our Celtic Tiger years. We drive. The landscape changes. Slowly at first, then more obvious changes, reflected in land usage, colours. The plush greenery replaced with industry, with grey hues. More change as our destination nears. Houses, hundreds of houses. Identical houses. No real amenities. There is a Church. This is our landmark, a key moment in our directions. We head into one of the housing estates. We are searching for UCD...We have been told it is out here...

...We arrive at a house, an ordinary house, one of many semi-detached houses in an estate cul-de-sac. This house is our destination. We enter and realise that this is no ordinary house. It is buzzing with women talking about words, photocopies, essays, spell checks. It is, we are told, essay deadline for their Women’s Studies programme. It is filled with excited, purposeful and nervous energy. Come and have a cup of tea. We follow and enter the kitchen. The kitchen, surely not, flip chart, 25 chairs stuffed into this room. This place feels like a classroom. It looks like a classroom. It is a kitchen. And these women, on this morning, make it a classroom in a kitchen. They create this by their being in place, this place of UCD and of learning. We have found it and it feels fantastic to touch something so powerful and positive, that is at the same time about knowledge and learning. We have found it. These women, these students have created it. It is their place.

These are proud women. They are showing off this place, their ‘learning environment’ which these women simply call ‘The Women’s Studies.’ The women talk about the garden: We are introduced to the smoking shed; A summer bench; a wall mural pained by a former student; a sundial again donated by a Women’s Studies graduate…Human Traces.

I like this place so much. Like the students I can feel how this place, the kitchen in this moment, is ‘The Women’s Studies.’ It is living, breathing, alive, at once about learning and freedom, at once representative of much that these women want to change in their lives and simultaneously the means by which they can do it. These women want kitchen choice. Not to be told to be in the kitchen. No, they want the right to choose it if, and when, they wish, or to choose other places in its place.
Their presence in this kitchen is paradoxical. They love the kitchen, this knowledge kitchen. In this place women come together to learn and talk and discuss and listen. They come to be nourished in this kitchen place, to be fed with knowledges, their knowledges. Certainly the Women’s Studies, the kitchen, the house, these places are capable of multiple identities, all intimately connected to the people within them, their purposes. It is as if my Education Geographies come directly to and from this house, this learning environment, symbolic of all things traditionally ‘feminine’ the kitchen place, both place of nurturing and sustenance, and for many places of chains, of drudgery and of violence, of choice-less-ness.

This house is filled with these women’s bodies, their hopes, fears, their desires. This house is their knowing and questioning and knowledge place. It is their lecture hall, tutorial room, coffee dock. It is all of these and more bounded within the walls, a fixed address, a fixed abode yet constantly evolving and creating new manifestations of the potential of what such a place might possibly be.

…And as we get back into the car we leave this University, this UCD behind: this embodied place, I feel certain it is surely a place of which UCD, beyond the hallowed walls, should be eager to celebrate.

Returning to the conference theme, we can pose the question, how might we contextualise this story so as to support international collaborations and emerging communities of practice aimed at exploring learning opportunities for studying creative understandings about teaching and research for equity and access? Lynch has consistently argued that universities have a long history of exclusion and selection, stating that:

They practised exclusion, not only through their selection procedures for students and staff, but also by maintaining rigorous boundary maintenance procedures within and between disciplines, and between what is defined as legitimate academic and what is not. (Lynch, 2006, p73)

This is a strong statement about the spatialised University, or what we can consider more broadly as a spatiality of education, one of boundaries and procedures, impacting not only on who enters but on what is valued. And these processes of access and participation have traditionally been, and continue to be bound up in gendered relations and reflective of a spatial hierarchy of place within our HE institutions. It is unsurprising therefore that one of the key objectives of Women’s Studies from its inception in UCD was to provide educational opportunities off campus, for those women who had been persistently excluded.

Clarke et al. remind us that ‘there is no inside without an outside’ (2002, p293). We could perhaps see these outreach students as outsiders within. However, this should not be seen as a negative interpretation of the ‘outsider’. On the contrary, the
resistive strategies employed by returning adults and students on mature grounds suggest a dynamism, resourcefulness and confidence in negotiating this double pathway, not as limiting, rather as liberating. It suggests a capacity to navigate both in and out, through and across, in a way that can be potentially empowering (Quinn, 2003; RANALAE, 2010). One way to imagine this further is to look to Rose’s conceptualisation of paradoxical space, which I appropriate here in terms of putting forward my understanding of the possibility of paradoxical education place: In other words, the reality of how these outreach students are strategically and purposefully outside the campus in order that they can be inside, or within, higher education. Gillian Rose (1993) almost 20 years ago posits this spatial simultaneity as an opposition to the limiting masculinist tradition of binary distinction, based on rational/emotional or male/female distinction or indeed in/out distinction. Perhaps such outreach programmes experience some degree of success because their geographies eschew the limitations of the in/out dichotomy? In other words Outreach Students in this kitchen place, as creators of their own, interesting geography in which notions of insider/outsider and belonging can be challenged, manage to reinvent both what notions of inside and outside might come to mean in terms of HE.

Conclusion
I have argued in this paper that by adopting a spatial lens, by starting from the position that geography matters, we can begin to interrogate and know better issues of equity and access. I attempted to prompt a moment of collegial recognition in this paper inviting you to explore with me an access geography, through story, drawing from my role as director of a Women’s Studies community/ university outreach programme in Ireland. Bolton observes that ‘we are embedded and enmeshed within the stories and story structures we have created, and which have been created around us’ (2006, p206). By capturing our spatial educational geographies through stories, I hope we can set about prompting empathies and fostering intellectual connections which may contribute to, and enhance, the international community of educational spatial thinkers interested in creatively pursuing understandings about teaching and research for equity and access, thinkers for whom geography matters.

Bibliography


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