Sojas' Trialectic: offering a re-imagining of learning spaces

A position paper for consideration for the Alpine TEL meeting 2013

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Introduction

> *"The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of and representation meaning"* (Homi Bhabha 1998)

Can Bhabha's work contribute to exploring aspects of 'Crisis' and contribute to the debate on change, discontinuity and dislocation in the wider world identified on the 'educationforthecrisis' 'wikipages? Can drawing upon the work of theorists such as Lefebvre and Soja theorists can assist in informing the debate by suggesting a different views of learner space, spaces where we (and our learners) can by-pass the traditional academy and its imminent commodification - so accurately predicted by Noble (2001)? My argument is that by using this body of work to examine our present, a re-negotiation of hitherto unimagined futures may be revealed through our dialogues.

Academics seeking spaces to engage students outside the academy is not a new concept - Eisner (1985), recommended that academics create their own creative space, within which they can engage their students, away from the realms of a fixed classroom curriculum. Eisner (1985, 1979) offered a challenge to some of the more hallowed assumptions about educational planning and educational evaluation. He was interested in seeking alternatives to the conventional scientific and technocratic procedures that dominated the planning of school programmes in the USA, England and other Western countries. Today, these constraints manifest in the pressure for maximum space utilisation, with the spaces previously colonised by students and teaching staff being reduced and reallocated as multi-functional spaces which arguably fit the needs of neither group. The divide between elite universities (in England) encouraged to recruit unlimited undergraduate students with particular A level grades (HEFCE 2011) differs significantly from the operating environments and budget constraints imposed upon the widening participation Universities. Policy makers have little to offer - the UK Government 'Harnessing Technology' White Paper (2004, 2008) laid out the goals of Technology Enhanced Learning for society as a whole and HE in particular. A discourse analysis of this policy text by Sinfield et al (2009) revealed a reductive vision of ICT with isolated, atomised students dislocated from their peers, their culture and their class (and ultimately thus from themselves) as they are plugged into remedial ICT packages and programmes designed to 'fix' them. However, the New Media Consortium (NMC) Report (2012:4) offers evidence that educational paradigms are shifting to include online learning, hybrid learning and collaborative learning; the question is can technology offer alternative spaces for learners to explore their worlds in a potentially empowering way, in a fast changing external educational environment?

Context

What might alternative pedagogical spaces consist of? Technologies such as Virtual Worlds invite the occupation of a 'classroom' space very different from the traditional University lecture theatre or computer lab that the learner otherwise inhabits. If we offered this space would this change how learners feel about education and studying – and perhaps how they felt about themselves as learners? Mobile learning enables a democratisation 'outside' the formal classroom – more students can access this technology – and students expect to use their devices for all aspects of their complex lives (cf Bradley & Holley 2011).

Framework for analysis

Offering different spaces for learners needs to consider the pedagogical patterns to their design (cf Laurillard 2012) as well as theorists such as Winnicott (1971) who argued that play is important in counteracting the implicit threat that occurs when we are in transitional spaces – between worlds, between classes and in alien educational settings, and Dewey (1938) who was an advocate of truly

active learning, valuing participation, democracy and democratic values; where cognitive engagement is matched by affective and behavioural features. My own work is located around encouraging learners in Higher Education to play and actively participate in creating their own learning spaces – and their own learning. Second Life is one aspect of this work. Holley et al (2012) gained a temperature reading of these changes by analysing how the learner represented themselves by the avatars they created for themselves. Given that, amongst other things, they appeared as a Klingon; a female sea captain; and a bumblebee – we argued that alternative spaces can indeed be alternatively inhabited and prove to be emancipatory and empowering as learning spaces.

We used Shields' (2004) model of Lefebvre and Soja's Trialectic as a framework for analysis (Figure 1). Here we explore the challenges of conventional spaces and the potential of virtual spaces .

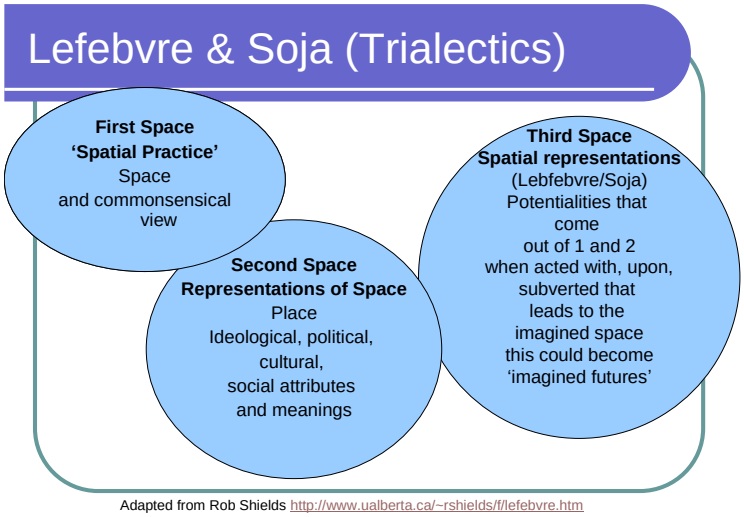

Figure 1: Framework for analysis

Adapted from Rob Shields http://www.ualberta.ca/~rshields/f/lefebvre.htm

In our model, the First Space can be taken as our common sense understanding of physical space: how we apprehend the 'real' world as autochthonous (sprung from the earth itself) rather than 'man' made. For students, especially those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, this can refer to their 'feelings' - of discomfort, of not belonging, of disempowerment - are also therefore naturalised, with the student and not the constructed space being the 'problem'. The Second Space is how this space is mediated by social, political, and economic discourse and whilst presented and offered as being fixed, rooted and natural, this is a fluid and continually changing context, influenced by, and acted upon by policy makers and aesthetics interpretations. The second space thus acknowledges the constructed nature of space – and of the potential to change it. Again, the argument is that those with less cultural capital are arguably less powerful in space per se – and definitely in the different spaces constructed by academic discourse. The Third Space offers the possibilities of re-imagining this space and occupying it differently now and in the future. For Lefebvre, the proposition is that third space is a social morphology:

> *"Vis-à-vis lived experience, space is neither a mere frame, after the fashion of the frame to a painting, nor a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it. Space is a social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure" (Lefebvre, 2003:93-94)*

Thus, it can be argued that the themes of physical and pedagogic spaces have been drawn into a new debate: what happens when we (and our students) leave our physical presence and start to engage with our learning in cyberspace – whether facilitated by social media, by virtual worlds, and what are the possibilities (and barriers) to a re-imagined future for learners?

I would be interested in exploring these concepts further with the Alpine community.

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