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Mapping spaces and choreographing classrooms: A study of communities of practice, learning and identity

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Schools are sites, locations and spaces where multiple and diverse communities of practice are constituted. Through their participation in these communities individuals have opportunities to appropriate and perform particular identities. In this study, using Gordon, Holland and Lahelma's (2000) metaphor of dance, we highlight the role of spatial practices in constructing and maintaining communities of practice. We consider how relations of difference and diversity play out in the choreography of the dance as we explore the identity work of the participants in a primary school classroom. The concluding discussion will focus on the implications of this study for teacher education programs.

Schools are sites, locations and spaces – both real and imaginary - where multiple and diverse communities of practice are constituted. These communities are dynamic as are their relationships with each other. Our use of space is informed by theorists of social space (e.g., Leander, 1999; Nespore, 1994; Soja, 1996) who focus on the ways in which space is organised and produced and how, as Doecke and Seddon (2002, p. 88) posit, “the design embedded in its production is linked to wider patterns of social division and inequality”. Taking a lead from these theorists, we argue that space is fundamentally involved in the construction of social formations such as communities of practice. Through their participation in the practices of a community, individuals are called upon to take up, and have opportunities to appropriate and perform, social and cultural identities. Learning to be a particular ‘kind of person’, to take up a particular identity, is envisaged as happening through participation in culture-specific social activities (Gee, 1992; Hirst, 2003; Hirst & Renshaw, 2004; Wenger, 2000; Wertsch, 1991; 1998). Communities of practice have specific characteristics relating to values and a tacit set of ground rules which are embedded within them (Renshaw, 2002). Through their participation in the spatial practices of the community, individuals learn which ‘dances’ or ways of participating are privileged, and which are not. It is through these ‘normalising’ practices that power is constituted and boundaries constructed: boundaries which can also “create divisions and be a source of separation, fragmentation, disconnection and misunderstanding” (Wenger, 2000, p. 233). As boundaries are constructed, and certain ‘kinds of people’ and ‘kinds of dances’ are recognised, represented and constituted, others are not. Thus participating in communities of practice can enhance, deny, and/or marginalise an individual’s potential to participate in society (Allard & Cooper, 2001; Cooper & Allard, 1999). In our discussion we consider how relations of difference and diversity play out in these communities through the construction of spaces, and the possibilities for choreography, by students and teachers together, to create new dances.

Methodology

The current study is part of a larger project. Data were collected during a six-month period using a range of ethnographic procedures, For example, classroom observations and semi-structured teacher interviews, conducted by University researchers (UR) and a student teacher/researcher (STR). The analysis of the data involved the identification of the participation patterns, or 'dances', in establishing the ground rules of the communities of practice that operate in this classroom, and by mapping the ways that spaces are constructed using the metaphor of dance, following the work of Gordon, Holland and Lahelma (2000). They describe the practices of school as "a complicated dance with formal and improvised steps" (p. 2). Both real and imaginary spaces play a part in the choreography of the dance, and are active in the ongoing construction of participants' identities. In mapping these spaces we explore the movement, flow and rhythms as participants take up their positions. We discuss how relations of difference and diversity play out in the choreography of the dance.

Analysis

We consider three aspects of the ways space is re/constructed in the classroom. We begin with the construction of pedagogical spaces and spaces within these, then we look at the fragmentation of spaces and finally, at how spaces can be conflicting. Using the metaphor of dance we examine how these spaces are constructed through the performances of the participants. We ask: what is the 'classroom dance' and how do students learn it, how do they resist it, and what other dances are they participating in; how do dances overlap and what opportunities are available for extemporisation, improvisation, and the incorporation of different 'steps' in the creation of new spaces?

Context of the study

The school, located in a low socioeconomic area of a rapidly growing urban area of southern Queensland, caters for diverse social and cultural groups. The school buildings represent the growth of the neighbourhood over many years and reflect changing economic conditions. The old Queensland style buildings on stilts with verandahs sit next to newer brick additions and demountables (portable 'temporary' buildings) resulting in an eclectic mix, ramshackle in parts, with an air of disrepair. Classrooms are cramped and very hot in the summer. The primary class (10–12 years olds) of 25 students (13 girls and 12 boys) is located in one of the demountable buildings, initially erected as a temporary measure to cater for the growing school population. Like many other classes in the school, some students have language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE). Five of the students in this class receive regular English language support. The classroom teacher was rather disappointed to be allocated a small classroom in half of a demountable without verandah space. Although it has a pleasant outlook the room is drab, grubby and uninteresting. The dividing concertina door prevents one wall being utilized. The teacher has tried to organize this space to be an effective pedagogical space for all of the children in the classroom. The desks are arranged in U shape with two rows of three desks in the enclosed area of the 'U'. This surveillance arrangement ensures all students face the

'front' where a whiteboard is located. The classroom is divided by this whiteboard. The smaller space behind is used for withdrawing students for individual or small group activities.

Dancing spaces

Pedagogical spaces within spaces within spaces

The teacher frequently changed the seating arrangements during the course of the observations. From the first day she made it clear to students that she was the one who called the tune: "I choose where you sit...it is my choice ...I make these choices based on your learning" (UR). These decisions are based on a range of factors and to cater for specific students. For example, she initially considers left-handedness (end of row), shortsightedness and hearing problems (close to the front), learning difficulties (front row) and behavioural problems (close to the front). Then, from her observations of students' working habits, she decides who their partners should be. If they are unable to work quietly and attend to the lesson she relocates them. Neither the physical nor communicative spaces were organised to facilitate group work. This way of organizing the students to construct a pedagogical space resembled a line dance: the students were required to follow the teacher, the 'caller', and follow the steps as they danced in their own spaces. If they impinged on another's space they were moved. Mostly, if students weren't 'in step' they were considered disruptive or resistant - there was little room for improvisation or negotiation.

The majority of the teaching day appears to be conducted in a didactic style, students work from their desks. Hence, the students get little opportunity to speak with the rest of their classmates, other than the people directly beside them (STR).

Some students found it difficult to follow these steps. On the first day Theo, a new student who had just arrived from Serbia and spoke almost no English, is a surprise for the teacher. Although he is often 'out of step' he seems to be eager to understand and enthusiastic to participate, and appeared to concentrate on the teacher's direction and the activity. Even though he understands very little of the language he uses contextual clues to aid his understanding, frequently looking around to see what other students are doing, he actively appropriates the ways of being that position him as a 'good' student. The teacher helps to 'bring him into step' to facilitate his learning by creating a space for him where he is allowed to transgress normal classroom rules as he learns the steps. He is partnered with Dragma, a student with the same language background, and they are allowed to communicate quietly so they don't disrupt the rest of the class. The identity that Dragma takes up is not constituted wholly by the teacher but has already been established outside the school space through family and cultural networks.

Dragma is an engaging student who seems eager to please and to offer information. She is also from the same cultural background as Theo. Serbian is the language spoken at home. Her mother uses English fluently and her father's English is limited. Dragma was born in Australia but has spent some years attending school in Yugoslavia. Dragma's family have assisted their neighbours, Theo's family, to settle. Dragma takes a caring and nurturing role to support Theo in both his learning and his

social relationships. She frequently turns to him to make suggestions, translate, give advice and explain what is going on in the class. A space constituted through family networks has been transported and productively deployed in the classroom. A pedagogical space within a space has been constituted here, one that enables Dagma to work as a surrogate teacher. This is a pivotal relationship in supporting his apprenticeship into this learning community, although the following observations suggest it might not always be productive:

Dagma might sometimes find it a strain. In addition, Theo currently appears very popular, which might appear as competition to Dagma who seems to seek acceptance....I wonder if Theo should have a boy sit next to him now in order to create a same-sex friendship. I noticed today as he ran to lunch he seemed a little lost as where to go and there was no-one waiting for him outside the classroom. (STR)

The teacher also suggested that Dagma's time and learning was being overtaken by her nurturing of Theo, precluding her involvement and engagement with other students. This could result in her marginalisation from some of the 'good' girls in the classroom. The teacher was also concerned by Dagma's academic performance; although her spoken English is reasonable, her written English is very weak. The teacher decided that the dance partners needed to change in an effort to enhance the pedagogical space and to reflect and mirror the classroom dance. Her strategy was to take the pressure off Dagma and move her next to an academically 'stronger' girl who could take the lead. Dagma could 'learn the steps' of the 'good' girl. She moved Djuric, also of Serbian language background, to sit diagonally opposite Theo, to provide learning and language support. Whilst increasing the physical proximity of the support the teacher also increased the gender proximity, arguing that Theo needed a 'same-sex role model' (UR). This arrangement proved temporary as Djuric left for an extended visit to Serbia a week later. Theo was then partnered with a 'high achieving' male student. We understood that there was a concern about him becoming too girlish in his constant association with Dagma – perhaps not learning to take the 'male' lead and thus precluding him from establishing an 'appropriate masculine' identity. His new partner, Martin, though considered 'bright', is not a 'good' student. Does this choreography encourage Theo to take up another position, interpellating a particular form of Australian masculine identity?

Fragmenting spaces

As well as trying to create pedagogical spaces by choosing and changing partners for the classroom dance, the teacher also works to maintain the dominance of this dance by dividing and fragmenting spaces of resistance. These spaces are often the 'boys' disruptive' spaces. Physically this is frequently achieved by using the 'good' girls' bodies to separate the 'bad' boys' bodies. Partnering a 'good' girl and a 'bad' boy is one means the teacher deploys to reduce resistance, break up one group of disruptive boys in the classroom, and prevent a dominant group from developing. The strategy of 'divide and rule' works to maintain the power and control of the teacher. In the following we consider how Kim works to construct a space of resistance. Kim is also a LBOTE student. His background is Korean. He has been living in Australia for more than a year, and is a little older than the other students. He works hard at maintaining relationships in the classroom. These are not only achieved through

physical and visual proximity, a result of the desk arrangements, but the space he creates is populated exclusively by other boys; he constructs and maintains a gendered space.

Kim is constantly sending looks and speaking quietly to three other boys in the classroom. He is not overtly disruptive but none-the-less has an effect on the other students around him by gaining their attention during lessons. I wonder whether the differences in classroom environments (between Korea and Australia) has lead Kim to feel an unaccustomed freedom? (STR)

In this class, it is not uncommon for gendered spaces to be choreographed through competitions for example, in word games. In one of these games, or 'competitive dances', the girls' and boys' sets, comprising same sex partners, used a dictionary in a contest to find the meanings of words. Kim and his partner were wallflowers for a while, unable to compete as they lacked a 'proper' dictionary. After a while, Kim turned to his electronic dictionary and working with his partner joined the dance. However it was difficult for them to learn the new steps; it took time for Kim to grasp how to use this dictionary differently – he had to select an English dictionary rather than the bi-lingual dictionary that he had been using previously (UR). In the activity following this competition Kim continued to use the dictionary and explore a range of other words.

Kim, Arvids and Nick have formed a small group with a lot of giggling and talking and little else, though they are not disturbing the rest of the class. Kim is using an electronic dictionary, which he shows to me and appears to be using. I leave them to their own devices for most of the lesson but little gets done, while the rest of the class is almost finished. Eventually Kim and Arvids are moved (by Helen's recommendation) to the front wet area to finish their work, while Nick is moved to the back of the class to finish alone. Kim and Arvids continue to giggle and the electronic dictionary appears to be a source of humour, so I confiscated it. (STR)

Kim and his partner had been exploring words related to sex during this session, they create a titillating space as they dance, their bodies arching over, shoulders high, heads down, with occasional sideway movements as they check their position and guard their 'game'. The teacher discovered this 'game' when she examined the search history of the confiscated dictionary. The affordances offered by this technology (search history) served to embarrass Kim, making the boys' private space a public space. In their discussions at the end of the school day the teacher and student teacher/researcher find this incident both amusing, but also one that they must regulate: "Helen and I both find this amusing but agree we will have to watch the use of the dictionary in the future!" (STR). Their amusement, 'boys will be boys', invites us to consider their collusion in the gendered construction of boys, the kinds of things boys are interested in, and the kinds of dances that boys will engage in – we wonder what the response would be if girls had been involved in this activity. Gender has been differently invoked to create spaces; paradoxically it has been deployed both to fragment and to reconstitute certain kinds of spaces - to break up bad boys' spaces and to reconstitute gendered spaces, reinscribing traditional boundaries. An opportunity was lost for choreographing a new dance, a hybrid dance where Kim, an expert technology user, could work with a partner with other expertise. This reciprocity could highlight the value each other's differences.

Conflicting spaces and contested spaces

In this final section of analysis we draw attention to how spaces can be contested and collide. The incident we explore involves Alan, a student excluded from the Language other than English (LOTE) lessons, apparently for his benefit. These lessons are conducted in the classroom space.

Alan is diagnosed with ADHD but does not *appear* to have any overt problems in regular class time. Helen feels that the loudness and excitement of the LOTE lesson may simply not meet Alan's learning needs. (STR)

Alan is excluded from the pedagogical space the LOTE teacher constructs for the learning of a second language, a loud and exciting space, a space in which the dance is not as structured or regulated as the 'normal' classroom dance. The LOTE space, the classroom teacher argues, is not conducive to Alan's learning. Alan is constructed in passive terms, as a student who has little control over his behaviour; excluding him from this differently organised and less regulated dance is an effort to prevent Alan being a 'bad' student. Similarly, the LOTE teacher argues it is for Alan's own good - "so he won't get into more trouble from the school" (STR). Her decision to exclude him was due to continual harassment (STR). Here we see him constructed as an active troublesome provocateur. The following incident occurred at the end of a LOTE lesson:

At the end of the class there is a loud confrontation between the [LOTE] teacher with a student [Alan] that re-enters:

T: Alan, you are not meant to be here while I'm here

S: It's over. It's lunchtime

T: Go! Get out!

S: No! I'm not going and you can't make me! This is my class

T: (Walks towards door). Go! No? OK your choice but there will be consequences (STR)

Following this clash, the student teacher/researcher reports:

The LOTE teacher informed me (not discreetly) that Alan had told her that he is Australian and that he doesn't need to learn another language in this country. She claimed she would not put up with 'that thing' in her class (STR)

Here we can see the collision of conflicting spaces. Alan and the LOTE teacher have both constructed spaces in this physical space of the classroom. Alan's denial of the LOTE teacher's right to teach in this physical space is about claiming back this space for himself as a member of the class. He argues that the LOTE dance is over. A different identity is constructed for Alan here. In his refusal to participate in the LOTE teacher's dance, and his rejection and resistance of the identity of the LOTE learner, he is constructed as dancing to another tune, a nationalist tune. He is positioned as a supporter of an Australian monolingual space, a space where only English is needed. By inference, this 'Australian' dance excludes the LOTE teacher. There is no space for interanimation, for negotiation, for dancing a new dance together.

Discussion

In this paper we set out to consider how relations of difference and diversity play out in the choreography of the classroom dance. We have seen how students participate in the construction of pedagogical spaces, the identities available to them in these spaces and the identities they invest in or resist. We have also seen how the teachers are closely implicated in this process. The diversity of the dances, the groups within the groups, the fragmentation and the conflicting spaces remind us of the ever changing, complex and dynamic places that classrooms are for students and teachers. We are also reminded of the relations of continuity and temporariness. Whilst classroom spatial practices continue to look much the same the classroom does not; the increasing mobility of students, their relocation and the effects of globalisation, even the temporariness of their classroom building suggest a diversity of spatial practices.

Students are learners and they learn in a myriad of ways and in a variety of spaces both real and imagined. We have considered how these spaces are implicated in their learning, how they are constructed, and the relationships between spaces - the small private spaces and the one public space. Although we found some overlapping spaces that allow for flexibility and movement, the borders of the dominant classroom space were closely monitored. The students with culture and language backgrounds that tend to marginalise them, to make them 'out of step', are gently and consistently encouraged and cajoled to 'take up the main steps'. In most cases they do this without resistance. Most students keep in step and when they don't they are brought 'back into line'.

There are various images of the dance that we have invoked to describe these spatialising practices. There is the line dance lead by the teacher who takes the students through the steps, sets out the rhythm and makes the moves apparent for the students. Students respond to these dances in different ways. Theo and Dragma dance together and have mutual ways of working and supporting each other. Kim leads a separate dance and many of the students observe for a while and tentatively follow a few of his steps. Alan rejects the unruly LOTE dance, is it because he needs the structure of a line dance or that he considers the LOTE dance as invasion of an Australian space? From our analysis it is clear that at different times there are dominant and marginalised spaces, that offer students different kinds of possibilities to be different kinds of people. We wonder about different forms of dance that may be possible.

Conclusion

By including an analysis of spatial practices we have broadened our understandings of sociocultural practices and the ways in which privilege is enacted. The ways that 'good girls' and 'good boys' and their ways of doing and being are highly valued in the classroom and how their dancing is used to demonstrate the excellence of the pedagogical endeavours. Meanwhile those who are out of step are re-partnered or excluded. This kind of analysis can help teacher education students reflect on the ways these processes are implicated in their own lives, and how social relations are constructed and can be interrogated, challenged and interrupted. These students need

spaces themselves to reflect on their learning and to watch the dances and reflect on what 'kinds of people' are valued and 'what kinds of dances' are recognised, as they consider the ways that teachers can most actively engage all their students.

The metaphor of dance has proved useful in understanding the complexity of classroom relationships and the way macro social practices are both reflected and re-constituted in the classroom. It can help teacher education students consider how teachers can use resistance and conflict and contestation to build more productive pedagogical spaces, rather than continuously reinscribing old dance patterns. By considering the classroom as a space for students to try out and initiate new steps and improvise the dance, there is potential to create new hybrid dances and spaces. The construction of productive communities of practice and pedagogical spaces offer the possibility, as hooks (2003) suggests, to open up new spaces for dialogue and to cultivate hope. If teachers see themselves as choreographers, as active in the construction of the dance, then steps can be changed, the dance can be opened to nuance and stylised to suit particular purposes; other kinds of dances can be considered. For example, circle dances could encourage the dancers to maintain their own style and allow them to perform individually or as a collective, that provide the floor for difference in community – not always a harmonious performance, but a community of practice that is about creating dances for diversity. Allowing for the expression of difference within the dance. The classroom dance then becomes an ongoing and dynamic process, a collection of diverse movements, not fixed prior to the dance, but evolving and responding in socially just ways.

Spatial metaphors permeate much of our thinking. Our sense of space is complemented by our sense of self as both part of and as separate from the world. The power of space is clear when one sees students in close proximity in active learning in small classrooms. Students react badly to being enclosed too closely in spaces. We ask how can the dance become emancipatory? Who is in the front line of the dance? Who is hidden in the back row of the chorus? Space and movement matter. Schools and classrooms provide spaces for learning, spaces for locating and positioning students. Spatial control is apparent in classroom settings, the ways that teachers place students, space students and construct students is crucial. The ways teachers choreograph the dance is an essential element that education students need to take account of in their professional practice. This project involved a teacher education student learning to dance as a researcher and the creation of a hybrid identity of teacher/researcher by appropriating the steps, for example, focussed observation, systematic analysis and critical reflection. How teacher education students actively construct themselves within the possible identities available to them is crucial for their learning and professional experience in communities of practice.

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