

## Learning Landscapes and Critical Pedagogy – Space as Social Science

Education theorists argue that much of the writings on educational change are at the level of technical implementation with ‘few attempts to provide a wider framing, which explicitly highlights the spatial ordering of curriculum and learning’ ( Edwards and Usher, 2003 2). Any inclusion of the spatial ordering of teaching and learning would involve extending the work of educational psychology ( Scott - Webber 2004, Gardner 1993) to include a sociology of space (Edwards and Usher 2003 2), framing the approach to spatiality and teaching within a more critical pedagogy ( Freire 1970).

What Edwards and Usher mean by a sociology of space are the ways in which space is socially produced: as place. The difference between space and place is that a space is seen as a box within which things happen, containing activities that can be measured and assessed in a variety of quantifiable ways; while place, on the other hand, is a site shaped by the relationships between the subjects and the objects that connect in a given situation. Each place or site is the product of the social context out of which it has emerged and, therefore, each situation will be context specific. The key issue here is that while spaces are fixed and immutable – no matter how much flexibility is created - each place has the potential to be redefined by the activities that occur between its walls and beyond ( Massey 2005) .

The concept of place rather than space is implied by Cosgrove’s (1998) definition of landscape. i.e., a space that is made with a particular social logic, or unifying principle:

*‘In geographical usage landscape is an imprecise and ambiguous concept whose meaning has defied the many attempts to define it with the specificity expected of a science...As a term widely employed in painting and imaginative literature as well as in environmental design and planning, landscapes carries multiple layers of meaning...the suffix “scape” posits the presence of a **unifying principle** which enables us to consider part of the countryside or sea as a unit and as an individual, but so that this part is perceived to carry the typical properties of the actually undivided whole....That **unifying principle** derives from the active engagement of a human subject with the material object. In other words landscape denotes the external world mediated through subjective human experience... Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world.’ ( Cosgrove, 1984, Social Formations: 13).*

Writers who engage with this more sociological concept of place are often concerned with notions of class, gender and race. Coffield et al ( 2004) are very explicit about this in their critique of educational psychology and the notion of learning styles:

*‘The main charge is that the socio-economic and the cultural context of students lives and of the institutions where they seek to learn tend to be omitted from the learning styles literature. Learners are not all alike, nor are they all suspended in cyberspace via distance learning, nor do they live out their lives in psychological laboratories.*

*Instead they live in particular socio-economic settings where age, gender, race and class all interact to influence their attitudes to learning. Moreover, their social lives with their partners and friends, their family lives with their parents and siblings, and their economic lives with their employers and fellow workers influence their learning in significant ways. All of these factors tend to be played down or simply ignored in most of the learning styles literature' (Coffield et al 2004 610).*

This more sociological approach to space is inspired by the work of Henry Lefebvre, who is credited with inventing the social science of space. In *The Production of Space* (1991), Lefebvre argues that every form of society produces its own form of space. Cities, for example, are not simply buildings occupied by people, but contain a systematic logic which informs not only the building design but the ways in which people inhabit the spaces. Lefebvre, following Karl Marx, relates each particular systematic social logic to the notion of 'mode of production', meaning the way in which systems of social logic are produced and reproduced. These modes of production include the reproduction of family life, the social relations of work, and the ways in which the relations of work are maintained. As these processes are distinctly social rather than natural they must be maintained by forms of order and power relations which attempt to maintain, control and perpetuate the logic out of which they are derived.

Lefebvre has been influential on a generation of sociologists and human geographers, providing a focus for a critical engagement with the notion of space as it relates to class (Harvey), gender (Rose) and race (hooks).

## **Class**

Marxist geographers, following on from Lefebvre, have further emphasised the ways in which space has been manufactured by capitalist relations of production. While Lefebvre's work demonstrates a sophisticated theoretical understanding of space, critics in the Marxist tradition argue that Lefebvre's work demonstrates a 'romanticism of perpetually unfulfilled longing and desire' (Harvey 2000 183). David Harvey seeks to rectify this through critically reworking a working class perspective based on the notion of the 'insurgent architect'. For Harvey, architecture is a 'supremely speculative and heroic profession' (254). In his work *Spaces of Hope* (2000) Harvey looks for the inspiration that drives this insurgency:

*'Yet the architect can (indeed must) desire, think and dream of difference. And, in addition to the speculative imagination which he or she necessarily employs, she or he has available some special resource for critique, a resource from which to generate alternative visions as to what might be possible. One such resource lies in the tradition of utopian thinking...Utopian thinking of spatial form typically opens up the construction of the political person to critique. They do so by imagining entirely different system of property rights, living and working arrangements, all manifest as entirely different spatial forms and temporal rhythms. This proposed reorganisation (including its social relations, forms of reproductive work, its technologies, its forms of provision) makes possible a radically different consciousness (of social relations, gender relations, of the relation to nature, as the case may be) together with the expression of different right, duties, and obligations founded on collective ways of living' (Harvey 2000 237 -238).*

## Gender

Women discussing academic space is not a new phenomena. Writing in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf discusses inequality and exclusion at Oxbridge, contemplating the relationship between women and fiction and the problems for women who wish to write while denied the facilities of an Oxbridge college (xiii). *A Room of One's Own* is written after Woolf's intention to read a manuscript in an Oxbridge library is prevented by the rule of an all male college:

*'That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library. Venerable and calm, with all its treasures safe locked within its breast, it sleeps complacently and will, so far as I am concerned, so sleep for ever'* (9).

She argues that in order to write women need the right kind of space, a room of one's own, and financial independence.

Woolf pursues the theme of university architecture in *Three Guineas*, written in 1938. In this text she rehearses a speech to be given to the National Society for Women's Service, an organisation that aims to increase the presence of women in higher education and the professions. In this speech she talks specifically about the ways in which university buildings can be made free from the traditions of competition, acquisition and militarism, values which she argues dominate research and teaching (xxiii).

In response to a request for money to rebuild a college for women she suggests the sponsors should ask the question:

*'Before you begin to rebuild your college what is the aim of education, what kind of society, what kind of human being it should seek to produce...the old education of the old colleges breeds neither a particular respect for liberty nor a particular hatred of war - it is clear that you must rebuild your college differently. It is young and poor; let it therefore take advantage of those qualities and be founded on poverty and youth. Obviously then it must be an experimental college. Let it be built on lines of its own. It must be built not of carved stone and stained glass, but of some cheap easily combustible material, which does not hoard dust and perpetrate traditions. Do not have chapels. Do not have museums and libraries with chained books and first editions under glass cages. Let the pictures and the books be new and always changing. Let it be decorated afresh by each generation by their own hands cheaply'* (198-199).

The issues that Woolf is writing about are still not resolved. Morag Shiach, PVC for Teaching and Learning at Queen Mary College, London - with responsibility for space development and editor of a Woolf collection that contains the work cited, writes: *'The extent to which higher education should foster intellectual and cultural liberty, in face of pressing economic demands from industry and government is still unresolved'* (2008 xxviii).

In her book *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), Carolyn Steedman talks about the ways in which, even by the 1960s and as one of the Robbin's generation of university entrants, her position as a female student was still as an outsider in a male

dominated academic culture, in a landscape within which women could not find a space to tell the stories of their lives. Her theme for the book is how can working class female academics establish a presence in Higher Education:

*'Where is the place that you move into the landscape and can see yourself?'*  
(Steedman 2000 142)

Feminist writers working in a geographical context have sought to introduce issues of gender into the subject of space and spatiality. Much of the writing reflects the invisibility of women in the geographical literature. The role of women within geography is discussed in terms of their relationship to private and public space. Private space is seen as the domain of women, dominated by domesticity and mothering, home and home making and a sense of belonging. Private space is about emotionality, sensual delight, physical pleasure and affection for particular locations. Feminist writers argue that these attributes and activities are seen as female sensibilities. Public space, on the other hand, is dominated by men and represents sites of fear, unease and insecurity for women. Feminists argue that for women, a resolution to this sense of public exclusion is found in the notion of community, as a site of resistance and of political struggle for social change. Gillian Rose (1993) theorises the concept of community as a type of paradoxical space, i.e., a site which self consciously challenges the contradictions that lie at the heart of the life of women and space: visibility-invisibility; margins-centre; same-other; personal-public; inside-outside. Rose argues that paradoxical space represents for women the politics of an emancipated space.

## **Race**

In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks writes as a black educationalist and activist, against all forms of educational discrimination.

She relates the issue of race, class and gender directly to the classroom and to a spatial sensibility linked to questions about how and why and what we teach:

*'The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom'* (hooks 1994: 207).

hooks refers to this practice of freedom as an 'engaged pedagogy', which she describes as being:

*'more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved and committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students'* (hooks 1994: 15).

## Learning Landscapes as Unifying Principle

If we are to follow Cosgrave's idea that the suffix 'scapes' implies the concept of a unifying principle for the spaces and places within which we are living and working, what critical unifying principle can be used to inform the design of our teaching, learning and research spaces?

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