

Service learning as a third space in pre-service teacher education

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This paper takes up the notion that service learning might be understood as a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Soja, 1996) in teacher education. In work with young people designated as 'at risk' in and out of school, the metaphor of the third space evokes a hybrid, in-between, disruptive space that can operate to disturb normative or deficit perceptions and to disrupt pre-service teacher subjectivities. The 'third space' also draws attention to the centrality of embodied space and place in pedagogical encounters. This paper describes three of the service learning strands in the suite of opportunities available to secondary pre-service teacher at the University of Western Sydney, and, using participant reflections on these placements as data, it begins to trace material and metaphoric articulations of third space in teacher education.

For postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha, 'third space' was a way of drawing attention to cultural difference as a productive location, as a 'position of liminality' that might be taken up in 'a spirit of alterity or otherness' (1990, p.209). In such a space, human subjects brush against one another and are consequently changed by that contact. Discourses such as those of race and other hierarchies of difference impact on such contacts. Although Bhabha was talking about a postcolonial third space, a space of cultural difference, in this paper I'd like to borrow his term to consider pre-service teacher training at the University of Western Sydney, where Master of Teaching Secondary students are required to complete a volunteer placement in an alternative education setting in a unit called 'PE3' (Professional Experience Three). Bhabha's metaphor invokes transition, transformation and productive instability. However it also provokes consideration of space as material location, with spatial and temporal dimensions. Critical geographer Edward Soja's conception of 'third space' takes up these aspects within an intensely social vision of how space is produced and used (1996). This paper begins an exploration of these multiple dimensions of 'third space' in teacher education.

Teacher education as liminal space?

The pre-service teacher education students in the Master of Teaching Secondary program are already immersed in a process that entails a potentially radical reconfiguring of their personal identities and subjectivities. They are already, to some extent, in liminal space, at a threshold, between two states of being. The intense course year of pre-service teacher education in which most of our students enrol is a professional rite of passage as they struggle to take into themselves the persona of the 'teacher' in relation to those others around them – students and teachers in secondary schools, broader communities of parents, families and professionals. Regardless of the critical lens that is embedded throughout our program, much of the course, including the two compulsory professional experience blocks, operates to inculcate them into normative practices and knowledge. In psychology, for example, they practise behaviour

management strategies that might enable them to control groups of adolescents; in curriculum method units they learn how to embed syllabus mandated learning outcomes into lesson plans. The two units of conventional professional experience in schools, under the supervision of practicing teachers, operate as another mode of professional normalisation.

By the end of their first block practicum in schools, many of our pre-service teacher education students report that they now feel like teachers, or are confirmed in their decision to enter this career. Some chafe at the requirement that they stay at university for another six months to complete their degree. Many return to university mouthing deficit discourses that they have picked up in staffrooms and classrooms, certain that the constructivist pedagogies they've been learning about won't work with kids like these, or in schools like that. My contention is that although teacher education might be broadly conceived as a liminal space, it has an inherent inclination towards conservatism and normalisation. However it is in the third practicum at the University of Western Sydney, the professional experience opportunity with a community engagement imperative, that can provide the moments of rupture that provoke new ways for our students to think about youth who are deemed to be difficult in schools, about schools that are officially designated as 'hard to staff' and about themselves as 'becoming teachers'. The PE3 experience, we hope, enables a 'different sort' of teacher to emerge from the liminal space of the teacher education course (Gannon, 2005). That teacher, we hope, will be more attuned to the alterity of the others that he or she meets in educational spaces, and to the intrinsically relational nature of all pedagogical encounters (Davies & Gannon, 2009). In the following section of this paper the theoretical work of third space is considered in relation to three strands of PE3: 'Beyond the line', 'Place pedagogies' and 'Next Generation – Learning Choices'⁽¹⁾.

Third space and *Professional Experience 3*

For Bhabha, the third space is a potent space of hybridity, a space that provides a 'terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation' (1994, p.2). For critical geographer Edward Soja, third space is a spatial term. We are, he says, 'and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings' and we need 'a strategic awareness of this collectively created spatiality and its social consequences...from the most intimate to the most global' (Soja, 1996:1). Soja collocates the spatial and the social, he stresses that space is created 'collectively'. It could be argued that the collective production of space occurs in classrooms every day, from lesson to lesson, even from minute to minute, however these are generally configured within normalising constraints such as those that focus on management of behaviour. PE3 experiences often involve one-on-one or small group engagement with young people, which provoke a different mode of collective production of space.

The notion of third space also captures the collision of local and global. Pre-service teacher experiences in the PE3 context are local and intimate. However their experiences also reflect global flows when many of the students with whom pre-service teachers work are Pacifica children or recently arrived Afghani or African refugees, or

when our students choose to take up overseas placements for PE3, or plan to go overseas to teach as soon as they finish their degree with us, or when our city-based students find that the only way they can get a job after graduation is by moving out to a remote or rural community. For Soja, 'third space is a purposively tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is a constantly shifting milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings' (1996, p.2). It captures the 'simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, the historical and the spatial, their inseparability and interdependence' (1996, p.3).

Consider this urban beginning teacher's reflection after he travelled into western New South Wales in the Beyond the Line strand of PE3. This strand aims to give participants an experience of the intimacies of rural schools often with higher proportions of indigenous students than most city schools and fewer resources. This student reflects:

...on my last night in Coonabarabran reflecting back on these last couple of days I find myself smiling. I've met teachers, locals and students who look at this town as a blessing, not a hindrance. These are people embracing this lifestyle and accepting country life for everything it offers. I see students doing work that far exceeded my expectations and I see a vibrancy that I never expected. That dread in the pit of my stomach that I have had ever since I signed those scholarship papers and said I'd go west has eased; the optimism in this underprivileged region of our state has opened my contemptuous eyes.

Small note: I was asked to tell a class a little about me, where I was from, what I was doing et al. So I launch into my spiel about myself, I say I'm from Bidwill. I notice blank looks so I say in Mt Druitt. Again I'm confronted by blank stares. It hit me, these kids haven't heard of Mt Druitt and all the negative connotations I've battled my entire life. To them I was just a person, not a criminal or a thug. It felt great.

What is most interesting in this reflection I think is the dramatic shift in this young man's sense of himself, as a person from a particular blighted section of our city (Gannon, 2009). 'I was just a person' he says, as if it is the first time: just a person with other people in this interactive, intersubjective, relation space. Collectively, and on a deeply personal plane for him, they have created a third space that is both social and material in which he become 'other' in a spirit of alterity.

The place that he writes of, his place, Bidwell in Mt Druitt, is a site where historical, spatial and social discourses intersect to construct a persona that he says he has struggled with for 'my entire life'. The part of Western Sydney that he refers to still carries the stigma and legacy of poor urban planning in the 1970s when new suburbs of cheap public housing with few amenities were built on semi-rural land and the inner city poor were moved way out west, to where our university was built many years later.

Another suburb nearby was the site of an intervention that two beginning visual arts teachers made in a PE3 project that contested the perception that western Sydney is a negative place in which to grow up, a 'road to nowhere' as one journalist called it (Gannon, 2009). In a PE3 strand entitled 'Place pedagogies' that was part of a broader research project, these young women, products themselves of this part of the city,

worked with a group of year ten students to interrogate, re-imagine and reclaim western Sydney in words and images.

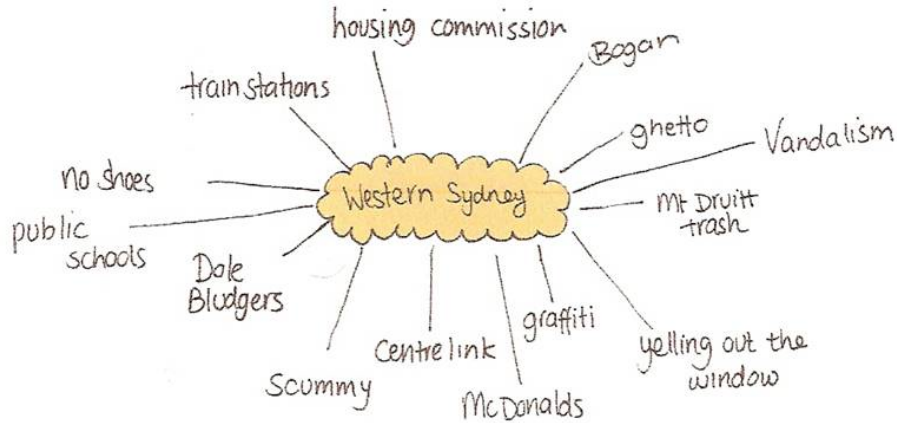


Figure 1: Perceptions of Western Sydney

One of their early activities involved generating mind maps of place with the school students⁽²⁾. Together they identified and reworked the negative stereotypes that circulate in the media and beyond: shifting the angle of their gaze from 'dolebludgers, bogan, Mt Druitt trash with no shoes eating McDonalds and yelling out the window' to a multicultural place of 'family and neighbours, playgrounds, parks, sports fields and bush reserves', a place that is 'home'. They developed their 'at home in Western Sydney stories' through recalling, sharing, writing and working visually with fragments from their own memories of childhood in Western Sydney.

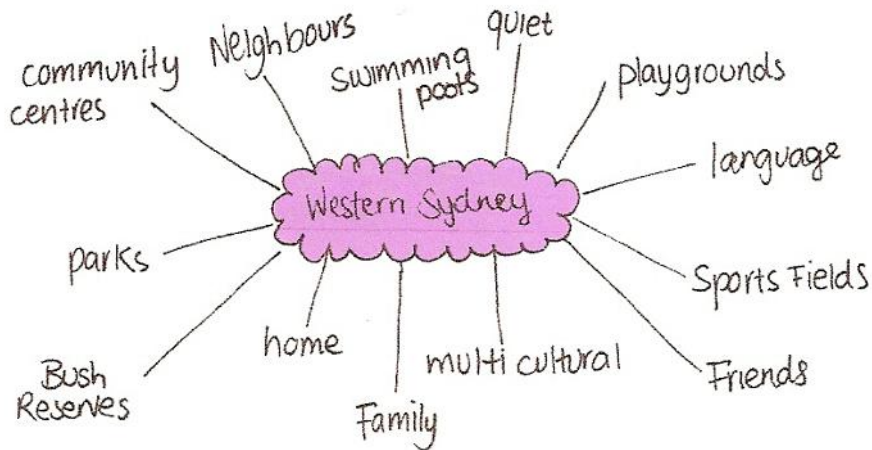


Figure 2: Experiences of Western Sydney

The project culminated in a public exhibition held in the University's Open Gallery, attended by families, friends and members of the public and the university faculty. The students' stories were mounted and displayed along one wall opposite the collective installation of the images that they developed from their stories. In this instance the students and the pre-service teachers worked collaboratively in a spatial and temporal third space created outside school hours and outside school curriculum to reconfigure their relationships with themselves, each other and their places in the world. There are elements of Bhabha's 'terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood ...that initiate new signs of identity' and his 'innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation' (1994, p.2) in their project.

Another pre-service teacher in the place pedagogy strand explored her place in the world, a small community on the precarious rural edge of the suburban sprawl. She created an audio-documentary of sounds and voices that incorporated original music, commentary by young children about living there now, memories of elderly residents about past times and specific locations in the village, early morning birdsong and other local ambient sounds including highway sounds, and her own narration and musings on the meaning of place in that place. Both these projects also demonstrate the 'simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, the historical and the spatial, their inseparability and interdependence' (Soja, 1996, p.3).

Another strand of our program – *Next generation learning choices* – established in partnership with the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, has pre-service teachers designing project-based learning opportunities to engage disenfranchised young people who are designated 'at risk'. They work in alternative education sites for the most part away from schools and as well as job readiness training, their projects have included collaboratively producing original hip hop CDs, books of children's stories, magazines, short films and graphic comics about bullying and sex education, learning and performing traditional Indian dance, physical theatre, building and racing electronic cars or canoes, orienteering, camping and learning how to rebuild bicycles.

One recent example had two pre-service teachers complete a short film claymation project in a 'Links to Learning' program where young teenagers who had been partially excluded from local schools collaborated on telling their own stories and mastering aspects of digital media to do this. Around forty students took place in this project. The student teachers reflected that 'learning was not just about their ability to use digital cameras and computers or to make stop animation, but included social skills, communication and team work...by the end of the process it was clear that new relationships had been formed and students had found better ways to work with other people'. These young people had found new and creative spaces in which to become other to the marginalised students they had become in their usual classrooms. The project culminated one evening in a public screening and awards night in a lecture theatre at the university which gave us an opportunity to encourage these students and their families to consider the institution as a space within which they might imagine themselves in the future. Two other pre-service teachers have planned a hip hop, song writing and CD recording project with Pacifika school students in another set of western Sydney schools.

In each of the outlined projects, the pre-service teachers who designed and implemented them have started to examine and critique their preconceptions about students who are deemed to be 'difficult', and to establish collaborative and creative relationships that differ in quality and emphasis from those in their other practicum experiences. They have learned about themselves and their capacities to create new spaces for themselves and their school student participants to reconfigure their relations with each other, with the world and with their intended profession. They locate themselves in social and material space, improvising 'strategies of selfhood – singular or communal' and taking up PE3 as a potentially innovative site for both 'collaboration' and 'contestation'(Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

Reflections from the *Next generation learning choices* strand provide more detail of the how these experiences can lead them to question current practices.

These students have been labelled as students that have behavioural issues or refuse to participate in activities for various reasons. After teaching these students and camping with them I have come to the conclusion that these students do not deserve this label. These students act up in regular classes simply because they are bored. The work they are asked to complete is not interesting or significant to them.

In the intimate context of this project, this pre-service teacher has had the crucial realisation that learning needs to be purposeful, and that even those students who are labelled as deviant in various ways have legitimate grievances. Another student reflects:

Often the teachers in school do not get to see these students as anything other than 'bad kids'. I probably would have been like that too had I not seen students that have been suspended so many times and who have very little respect for teachers complete our project. (DSF, 2006, p.10)

This student dissociates herself from the category of teachers in schools who have no alternative to the normative way of perceiving students who have complex lives and troubled histories of schooling. Another student stresses that he 'no longer [has] any fear about getting a tough school'. Yet another contrasts her PE3 experience with the two block professional experiences in her comments that: 'I found that by getting down on the students' level and being an active participant rather than the dominant enforcer had a surprising affect on the students' ability to relate to the material and motivated them to complete the work'. Another student learned that 'Teaching isn't all about rules and regulations or syllabus outcomes'. Another student noted that he 'learned how much young people desire to be able to have their own say in their learning - they want to share their own opinions and experiences, and have them acknowledged and valued and incorporated into the teaching'. Although these strategies may not be surprising to many experienced and successful teachers, high rates of exclusion and weak retention rates suggest that too many students feel that school is not for them. For example, school participation rates for 17 yr olds in 2008 were just 62.7%, a rise of only .6% from 62.1% in 1998 (ABS, 2009), and continuation rates from yr 11 to yr 12 hover at 82.6%. The students least likely to complete secondary school in Australia are those who our students might meet in these alternative education sites and in other PE3 strands.

My argument is that the project-based opportunities that pre-service teachers have in this strand, in a state where curriculum tends to be highly regulated and dominated by an endless stream of examinations, invites the disruption of what might be called 'teaching as usual' (Gannon, 2005, p.3) in terms of their perceptions of students who are deemed difficult. However like the young women in the art project, and the young man who travelled into the west of the state, the pre-service teachers in the Next Generation project also recognise themselves in the students they met, invoking the spatial dimension of subjectivity that Soja emphasises in his version of third space: the 'collectively created spatiality [with]...social consequences', an interweaving of 'the social, the historical and the spatial' – where these are inseparable and interdependent. In an external evaluation of the pilot project for *Next generation learning choices* in 2006, the reviewer noted that

the student teachers were bemused by my open admiration of their resilience, saying, 'But we know these kids: we went to the same schools. Some of us have had lives like they have.' One student teacher, who had grown up in Redfern, put his cultural knowledge to good use, gaining the trust of Aboriginal students by asking about their families. (DSF, 2006, p.18)

In her recognition of the importance of place in their stories of being students and becoming teachers, the reviewer concluded that

this 'local and regional experience' of its student teachers - not to mention the location of its campuses in areas of high economic need - is an important resource for UWS, and one that should encourage the university to position itself as a national leader in the education of teachers of challenging students. (Reviewer: Diary note) (DSF, 2006, p.18).

Conclusion

In this paper I have skewed the metaphor of the third space from Soja (1994) and Bhabha (1990, 1994) to frame PE3 as an opportunity for pre-service teachers to think otherwise about themselves and their students. The projects that I have outlined in this paper are characterised by a willingness to listen and attend closely to young people's needs and interests, to recognise their particular places in the world, and to adopt a 'strategy of attention' that is crucial to engage (or reengage) young people in learning (Ellwood, 2009). If we imagine pedagogy not as the effective delivery of knowledge, content and skills but instead as a series of particular encounters in relational, affective and embodied space where teacher as well as students are in a mutually constitutive space of becoming, then a third space in teacher education can become something we can articulate, cultivate and encourage.

Notes

(1) Human ethics approvals have been secured to use student written reflections as research data for the unfunded project 'Community engagement and professional experience: Beyond institutional walls'.

(2) Human ethics approval for use of students' reflective journals was secured through the project *Place pedagogies in rural and urban Australia* funded by Australian Research Council Discovery Grant DP0663798 held with project partners Professor Bronwyn Davies at UWS and Professor Margaret Somerville and Dr. Kerith Power from Monash University.

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