

Intro to ACCESS Special

ACCESS Special Issue
Modern Learning Environments

LEON BENADE

AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

MARK JACKSON

AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

This Special Issue was inspired by the increasing emergence within educational institutions, such as schools and universities, of large, flexible spaces whose design is underpinned by cutting-edge principles and technologies. We, the editors, come variously from backgrounds in design (Jackson) and education (Benade), and see great potential in theorising at the intersection of building design, pedagogy and educational policy.

The development of flexible learning spaces (known severally, for example, as ‘Modern Learning Environments’, ‘Innovative Learning Environments’, ‘Flexible Learning Environments’ and ‘New Generation Learning Spaces’) can be traced, we suggest, not only to design creativity, but also to the desire by governments to influence educational outcomes. The displacement of traditional classrooms by large, ergonomically furnished open spaces that encourage flexible movement and collaboration, also presuppose multifarious approaches to teaching and learning, calling on teachers to work in teams and to deprivatise their practice in spaces that are transparent and porous. Education policy-makers contend these approaches are in the service of the development of skills and dispositions suited to the unpredictability of the 21st century knowledge economy (Ministry of Education, 2011; OECD, 2006; 2013).

Thus, governmental intent to control educational practices are evident in moves to establish modern learning environments (MLE) in schools and places of higher education. Such moves raise critical questions relating to their origin and the deeper underlying relationship between conception, design intention, spatial practice and competing discourses articulating particular ways of designing education facilities.

As a provocation for this Special Issue, we called on the view of schools’ architect, Prakash Nair (2011), who proposed that the classroom is obsolete, and that standard, formal or traditional single-cell classrooms should be substituted with MLEs. Nair’s proposed design principles embody the 21st-century worker, the self-directed, ‘critical thinker’ and collaborator who can work in a globally connected, technologically rich environment. The single-cell classroom is ‘obsolete’ precisely because it does not emulate the 21st-century workplace, whereas the MLE does.

The MLE, as defined by Nair, is an instance of what Henri Lefebvre termed ‘the representations of space’. This is “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers...all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived” (1991, p. 38). The authors of this Special Issue were asked to consider whether these non-traditional spaces facilitate the development of 21st-century learning. Is there an implicit or explicit *spatial* model given in educational documents correlated with new models for pedagogy? How do we recognise relations between the discursive spaces of official documents, the institutional spaces of their agency and the lived spaces of their actualisation? What is the ideology of space, and what are the discourses it articulates? How may space be deciphered (Lefebvre, 1991)? Equally, how are spatial practices engaging questions of power (Foucault, 1984, 2007)?

The initial Call generated over 40 abstracts. Of these, twelve were considered to have addressed the Call in all its complexity and variety, yet with a specific focus on the act of provisioning schools (and universities) with building space designed to achieve a specific policy intent: that of reconceptualising the way teaching and learning ought to occur, and developing the imaginary of the connected 21st century knowledge worker. We are pleased to present to our readers in this Special Issue the final result of six articles that emerged from the peer review process. In addressing the Call, these authors have addressed questions of the imagined 21st century knowledge society, and the development of human capital to meet the needs of the generic knowledge society. Whilst the authors here seek to theorise space, it pays to remember that space is a lived reality for those who occupy it. Thus questions around the nature of that human experience are worthwhile and significant.

The development of non traditional learning space arises from a policy discourse, yet this discourse is not without its inner contradictions and tensions, not least of which is that it is not plain that one educational paradigm has been replaced by another: rather, there is a prospect that while everything seems to change, very little changes in fact. Thus the evil of ‘industrial education’ may have been replaced by a model no less blunt in its expression of what is desirable in education. Indeed, has the basic purpose of schooling suddenly and dramatically altered between 1999 and 2000?

The discussion commences with Dianne Mulcahy and Carol Morrison’s ‘Re/assembling “innovative” learning environments: Affective practice and its politics’. Mulcahy and Morrison note: ‘The article is premised on the idea that space is an under-acknowledged and under-theorised concept when attempting to understand how ILEs work and the political work they do. Thus, initially, we outline two interpretive frames for thinking and working with the concept of space, and show how each informs and attaches to a particular learning spaces literature’ (p. 748). Mulcahy and Morrison approach their analytics through the work of Gilles Deleuze and his collaboration with Felix Guattari. The key spatial notion is ‘assemblage’ whose practice is that of ‘affects’. Deleuze and Guattari developed the notion of ‘assemblage’ in the two volumes of their major collaboration, *Schizophrenia and Capitalism*. Volume I, *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977), introduced the notion of assemblage in a radical rethinking of how bodies and the social are to be thought. In part its target was psychoanalysis, though more broadly, it questioned how spatiality and embodiment operate through the flows of desire, which is to say, as affect. Volume II, *A thousand plateaus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), renovates in radical ways many if not all of our traditional notions of how spatiality and power are to be thought. In approaching an analysis of innovations brought about by new building programmes requiring new spatial teaching practices, the Deleuzian notion of assemblage brings a new understanding of relationality to how teaching and learning bodies constitute sites of affect in the multiplicity of ways that spatiality is constituted in practice. For Mulcahy and Morrison, affective spatial practices are the constituting forces for a politics of the teaching body.

The work of Deleuze’s colleague and friend, Michel Foucault, is developed in Emile Bojesen’s ‘I/MLEs and the uneven return of pastoral power’. Bojesen commences with the global impetus of the OECD in developing innovations in educational institutions. Though an initial analysis of approaches in the United Kingdom suggests significant resistance to pressures for innovating building fabric, concomitant with the implications of innovating spatial practices in learning and teaching, and thus the increased freedoms supposedly afforded by such innovations. In introducing circumstances in the U.K., Bojesen opens an analysis of the genuine stakes in the freedoms pronounced by the OECD models for education innovation. He squarely frames this in terms of a return to a particular exercise of power defined by Foucault as ‘pastoral power’, an exercise that seems to have been abandoned in current educational approaches in the U.K. As Bojesen notes: ‘As this article argues, I/MLEs are not the creation of a ‘modern’ or ‘innovative’ learning environment but rather the reclamation of an educational technique that was pioneered en masse almost two centuries ago ...’ (p. 787). Discussion extends to the role of moral training in early nineteenth century models of education, and the role of I/MLEs in the extension and translation of moral training in terms of an exercise of power that seemingly is a production of freedom.

The issue of spatial analysis as something both strategic and overlooked is taken up in Leon Benade's 'Is the classroom obsolete in the 21st century?' Benade opens with the provocation by Prakash Nair concerning the obsolescence of the traditional classroom. However, Benade quickly complicates this provocation by teasing out the extent to which the very notion of space itself tends to be under-theorised, overlooked or considered self-evident in discussions concerning learning spaces, their design and physical character, as well as the spatial practices they 'contain'. One of the initial or grounding arguments by Benade is that space is not a 'container' for practices. Rather spatiality, in its ontological disclosure, requires direct address as practice. This address is undertaken through close analysis of the writings of the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991). Lefebvre's engagements with space need to be read in a wider concern with everyday life, spatiality and the social that was a key or critical concern of French existentialism and phenomenology before and after the Second World War. The question of space was central to the philosophical writings of a generation of French theorists, spanning existential phenomenology, structuralism and post-structuralist engagements. These include Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze and, in collaboration, the French psychoanalyst, Felix Guattari, and Jacques Derrida. These theorists are each taken up in various ways across the articles of this Special Issue. Benade develops his analysis of MLEs in the application of Lefebvre's understandings of spatial practice to a series of case studies of innovations in learning spaces for two Auckland primary schools. The focus here is especially on dislocations to teaching practices. Benade's shuttle between the critical ontology of space and the everyday of teaching practices is especially forceful in bringing to question the complexity of those questions concerning obsolescence and innovation.

As with the contribution from Mulchay and Morrison, Deleuze is also central to the concerns of Jennifer Charteris in her 'Innovative learning environments and new materialism: A conjunctural analysis of pedagogic spaces'. Again key concerns are with the Deleuzian notions of assemblage and affect, though Charteris engages extensive literature on 'new materialism' that re-positions the agential privilege given to human rational thought over organic and inorganic matter. The article commences with the global and political contexts of the work undertaken by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This work has been a catalyst globally for acceleration in the development of innovative learning space initiatives. Charteris approaches the agenda of such innovation from the perspective of a seminal article by Deleuze, "Postscript on the societies of control", first published in France in 1990 and in English in 1992. The article is short amounting to seven pages and is broad in scope. It addressed a series of concerns with power and the social that were especially the concern of Deleuze's friend, Michel Foucault. Deleuze's pronouncements are somewhat different to the work Foucault developed in the early 1980s prior to his death in 1984. The key term picked up by Charteris in her article is 'modulation'. With this term Deleuze differentiates how he understands control from the work by Foucault on disciplinary mechanisms: 'Whereas disciplinary society forged fluid, distinct castings, the society of control functions through flexible, modulating networks...' (Deleuze, 1992, p. 139). Charteris notes: 'Deleuze's (1992) notion of the control society (modulation) enables us to grapple with the question of how principals envisage the spatial relations of classroom territories in light of ILEs, as one of the entangled relationalities produced in this new educational assemblage'. The notion of modulation was itself borrowed by Deleuze from the work of Gilbert Simondon, a theorist greatly admired by Deleuze. The importance of new materialism is in recognising the agential force of objects that compose relationalities in human spatial practices. Hence objects are not inert and passive, awaiting human activations. This opens human and object relationalities to the flux of becomings constitutive of a politics of affect. This critical approach is applied to a qualitative study of 165 school principals in assaying understandings of innovative learning environments.

The contribution by Chris Peers, 'The scene of the classroom', returns to our opening provocation by Prakash Nair that traditional cellular classroom facilities are now obsolete. Peers applies a sustained and detailed rhetoric analysis to the Nair pronouncement. The argument developed is complex and addresses the deconstructive philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Briefly, Derrida, in a number of important essays, questions how language becomes a phenomenon that defines and thus substitutes for an experiential world. Deconstruction itself, as that name might imply, aims to privilege neither an

empirical givenness of matter, nor a rational concept that supposedly knows that matter. For the most part, Western thought has privileged the rational concept over material bodily sensations. Deconstruction does not aim to invert this privilege. Rather, it questions the very economy of privilege itself. It suggests there is an undecidable debt of each to the other, such that we must recognise any privilege to be not epistemological—grounded in the certitude of knowledge—but rather ethical, concerning force and the politics of decision itself. Hence, Peers sustains an extended critique of the political implications of not only the statement made by Nair, but also the epistemological privilege Nair gives to an anthropology for which the speaking animal is absolute.

With the concluding article in this Special Issue collection, by Amy McPherson and Sue Saltmarsh, we are returned to considerations of embodiment, and spatiality as affective bodily practice. ‘Bodies and affect in non-traditional learning spaces’ develops a poignant critical engagement with three case-study vignettes encountered by the authors in ILE school environments, and registered through an acute observation by the French philosopher of everyday practice, Michel de Certeau. De Certeau is especially known for his seminal collection of essays, *The practice of everyday life* (1984). In one particularly important and much-referenced essay, ‘Walking the city’ de Certeau notes: ‘There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can “invoke” or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in—and this inverts the schema of the *Panopticon*’ (De Certeau, 1984, p. 108). De Certeau’s concern here is with contrasting the world understood from the viewpoint of official discourses and objective determinations, to a world understood as everyday practice, and pedestrian utterances. McPherson and Saltmarsh apply a subtle analysis to three scenarios in learning environments where *they* were ‘haunted’ by what they encountered. In describing these scenarios the authors give particular emphasis to how bodily affects constitute relations that are essentially spatial practices whose affordances are constituted by ILE innovations. The implications drawn out point to how relations of force may operate in ways that seem counter to the rhetoric or discourses of capacity and freedom that supposedly define programmatic understandings of ILEs.

References

- De Certeau, M. (1987). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the Societies of Control. *October*, 59, 3-7. Retrieved from <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0162-2870%28199224%2959%3C3%3APOTSOC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T>
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1977). *Anti-oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia Vol. I* (R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane, Trans.). New York: Viking Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia Vol. II* (B. Massumi, Trans.). London & New York: Continuum.
- Foucault, M. (1984). Space, knowledge, power. In P. Rabinow [Ed.]. *The Foucault reader* (239- 256). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (2007). The language of space. In J. Crampton. & S. Elden [Eds.]. *Space, knowledge, power: Foucault and geography* (163-167). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. (D. Nicholson-Smith, trans). Oxford, United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell.
- Ministry of Education. (2011). *The New Zealand school property strategy 2011–2021*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Primary-Secundary/Property/SchoolPropertyStrategy201121.pdf>

Nair, P. (2011). The classroom is obsolete: It's time for something new. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.fieldingnair.com/index.php/publications/>

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2006). *21st Century Learning Environments*, OECD Publishing, Paris, France. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264006508-en>

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2013). *Innovative Learning Environments*. Paris, France: Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264203488-en> Retrieved 7 Feb 2016 from http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/innovative-learning-environments_9789264203488-en