

Vital assemblages in geography: paving the way for teaching geography from a socio-material perspective

Itta Bauer

(Department of Geography, University of Zurich)

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Introduction

This session is on “Theorizing the geographies of education and learning”. To me, theorizing does not mean research detached from real life or using an empirical case study only to back a theoretical argument.

What I personally find most inspiring for my work are studies that illustrated the benefit of using a certain theoretical approach. Thick descriptions of research that illuminate the study in colorful details including all shades of grey. Two references may suffice as evidence, here: First, Cindi Katz’s work on neoliberal restructuring of children’s everyday lives in the US and in Africa (Katz 2004). And secondly, Jan Nesor’s early research published as “*Tangled up in schools*” (1997). Nesor understood schools as points of entry to empirically study and draw connections to wider issues, such as politics, space, bodies and signs that are not only embedded in the educational process, but also “bind them to networks of practice” extending far beyond schools (Nesor 1997: xiii).

Interestingly, children’s geographies and geographies of education and learning are two threads that are implicitly running through Katz’s and Nesor’s work. Of course, Cindi Katz and Jan Nesor are both drawing on quite different theoretical approaches in their empirically informed studies. However, they both do not feel the need to theorize on the bodies of literature on geographies of education and learning in a more general sense. So, why do we feel it may be necessary, nevertheless?

Connecting things - a “vital assemblage”

The session’s motto on “theorizing the geographies of education and learning” made me think of Bruno Latour’s warning that “only dead theories and dead practices celebrate their identity” (Latour 1999: 15). It’s worth remembering that Bruno Latour is famous for driving nails into coffins, especially with respect to Actor-Network Theory, which is far from dropping dead, yet. But the theorizing in this context is about something different. It’s about looking into geographies of education and learning and elaborate what’s new and exciting or maybe controversial about it. But it is just as much about looking out and

exploring what lies beyond it and negotiate the logic and politics of disciplinary boundaries (see Massey 1999: 6).

“It seems to me that some of the most stimulating intellectual developments of recent years have come either from new, hybrid places (cultural studies might be an example) or from places where boundaries between disciplines have been constructively breached and new conversations have taken place.” (Massey 1999: 5)

Fully agreeing with Doreen Massey’s arguments, I would like to add another point. Drawing on the metaphor of “vital assemblage” (see Bauer 2016), I argue that “theorizing the geographies of education and learning” is about connecting. It is about connecting subjects, objects and things. It’s about connecting theory and practice, research and teaching. It’s about connecting discourses that share similar interests, but have not quite been in touch with each other, recently: geography of education and geography education. And due to my background in the German discourse on teaching and learning geography, I would like to add Geographiedidaktik to this short list of academic fields.

On top of the issue that there are different discourses running parallel to each other with hardly any interfaces, it’s also a critique concerning our own scientific community as well as a critical engagement in recent political and social developments that may strengthen our concerns and motivation in favor of an engaged pedagogy of geography *and* education.

Encouraged by a seminal article of Janice Monk in the Journal of Geography in Higher Education (2000), I would like to use two empirical examples from my research and teaching in order to look into and look out or rather beyond geographies of education and learning and try to face the challenge of “connecting things”.

I would like to refer to an example of my teaching to illustrate my first point. The video/photo shows one student leading a pupil through a large part of a “labyrinth of the senses”. This labyrinth has been created by a group of teachers-in-training students in a seminar on outdoor learning and teaching geography. The project of the human geography group attempted to translate ideas of more-than-representational theory with the help of a “labyrinth of the senses”. Having been inspired by ideas from John Wylie, Hayden Lorimer or Tim Ingold, the students elaborated ideas on the senses: seeing, feeling, smelling, tasting and doing/performing. Hearing was indirectly included by a task, which made the pupils see the mountain landscape deafened by earplugs (oropax).

A school class of young people aged between 15 and 19 had been invited to a fieldtrip that tested and evaluated the different learning posts – including other topics like hydrology, geology or landscape and settlement – created by five groups of students altogether. The learning posts were designed as a way to illustrate a geo trail for school classes and hikers in a mountain region nearby Zurich. The course for the students-in-training and the fieldtrip of the students

were both evaluated positively, because it was considered a real learning experience for both groups.

I want to use this example to show why I have problems situating my research and teaching clearly within only one of the sub-disciplinary areas that are presently being discussed in *geography and education*.

The course on outdoor-learning is easy to link to core issues discussed within **“geographies of education and learning”** (Holloway and Jöns 2012):

“[G]eographies of education and learning consider the importance of spatiality in the production, consumption and implications of formal education systems from pre-school to tertiary education and of informal learning environments in homes, neighbourhoods, community organizations and workspaces” (Holloway and Jöns 2012: 482).

The course connected children`s informal learning spaces outdoor with formal spaces of education at school, because the geography students invited the pupils to a field excursion which focused on certain geographic topics and conveyed them in quite playful ways. There has been a follow-up of the geographical topics and personal experiences of the students after the field trip, so outdoor-learning and classroom-learning were directly linked to each other.

But then, this course can also be classified as **“geography education”** for the teachers-in-training and the school class alike. I refer here to a definition by Graham Butt:

“(…) geography education needs to be forward-looking and futures- oriented. It must actively prepare young people for living in the communities they are growing up in, and which they will both shape and be shaped by. Geography should also help young people understand the world around them, make informed decisions about issues that affect them at a variety of spatial scales and develop their sense of identity within a world of multiple cultures. It must offer something meaningful to both the learner and the citizen, while being confident in its response to developments in the subject discipline and in the wider world of education.” (Butt 2008: 158)

In its learning targets and outline, the course has been “forward-looking and futures oriented”, because the students tried to translate new theoretical discussions within human geography to the pupils in resourceful and enjoyable ways. The students were motivated to provide “something meaningful to their learners while being confident in its response to developments in the subject discipline and in the wider world of education” (Butt 2008: 158). Through their hands-on approach, the students in the course offered a counter-argument to the frequently repeated argument that the gap between geography in schools and geography in the academy” has been constantly widening (Butt 2011: 3; see also Castree et al. 2007, Hill and Jones 2010).

The students who took the course on outdoor learning were enrolled as master students of geography and/or teachers-in-training. Bearing in mind this group of students, I also included aspects of “Geographiedidaktik” into the course syllabus. “Geographiedidaktik” is an academic field of interest that may be translated as the scholarship of teaching and learning geography.

Jank and Meyer summarized the core interests of didactics by the following question: "Was soll von wem, wann, mit wem, wo, wie und womit wozu gelernt werden?" (2002: 16).

A definition by Alfred Riedl provides a more explicit reference to research:

Didaktik ist die Wissenschaft und Praxis vom Lernen und Lehren. Didaktik umfasst alle Aspekte im Gesamtkomplex von Entscheidungen, Begründungen, Voraussetzungen und Prozessen für Unterricht. Didaktik als berufswissenschaft einer Lehrkraft soll zur wissenschaftlich orientierten Bewältigung ihrer Aufgaben in Schule und Unterricht befähigen" (Riedl 2004: 8).

In recent years, I have developed an interest in Actor-Network Theory and sociomaterial approaches with respect to contexts of learning geography in formal and informal contexts. Let me briefly sketch out my ideas on a sociomaterial Geographiedidaktik by referring to an example from my empirical research at a school in Zurich.

(picture)

I would like to focus on the actors of the situation in more detail. So who exactly is acting, participating, doing geography, here?

The teacher is busy on the board, one student standing next to him is watching. The other students are either watching the teacher, too, or they are discussing something with each other or starting their laptops for the following group activity. So much to the human actors.

But what else is acting, creating, participating and co-constructing this geography class?

If Bruno Latour would get a glimpse at this scene, he might remind us that "without the nonhuman, the humans would not last for a minute" (Latour 2004: 91). So, let us look beyond the human actors. There is the board with the notes of the teacher, letters that are written in chalk. The laptops, chairs, tables, books, maps, pens, folders, paper, watches, lightning, clothes - you name it. However, the materiality of learning must be extended to the entanglement of invisible, precarious, socio-material and immaterial things (Sorensen 2009: 61). All of these material and immaterial things, all of these human and non-human actants (and many more) merge in this geography class that we may also be calling a vital assemblage. Thinking and analyzing teaching and learning in this way makes use of the concept of "symmetry" as it used in ANT-approaches. Constructing school as a vital assemblage means conceptualizing school as a social space that is constantly being made up and re-constructed as an acting network.

Conclusions and consequences

Despite some geographers interest in school as a vibrant social space of young people and various intersections (Fielding 2000, Valentine and Holloway 2002), architecture (Kraftl 2006; 2012), curriculum (Biddulph 2013), power-ambiguities (Kultz 2015) and so forth, there has been only been cautious attention to study what is actually going on in geography classrooms or lessons. However, these spaces and places of learning are interesting sites for geographers and their empirical research – no matter what label you prefer to put on it.

My argument has been to try and cross boundaries between the fields of geographies of education and learning, geography education and Geographiedidaktik.

In my conclusion, I wish to return to Doreen Massey`s introductory point stating that “defining a discipline defines what lies beyond it” (Massey 1999: 6). My hope is that by focusing on “connecting things”, we may actually renew the debate on “geography without borders” which has been started by Castree, Fuller and Lambert about ten years ago (Castree, Fuller and Lambert 2007).

To me, this is what theorizing geographies of education and learning should be about, in order to really make a difference in the teaching and learning of geography for the sake of our children and students.

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