

Spatial narratives: The problem and potential of the spatial in narrative Higher Education research (0245)

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Abstract

This paper has an explicitly methodological focus, arguing for the importance of discussions of space, place and locality in Higher Education (HE) research. Based upon my research project into student narratives of studying HE in Further Education (FE) colleges in England, the paper first highlights the multiplicity and complexity of discourses of space in this context. The paper then explores the problematic nature of researching the physicality of space, asking whether it is possible to capture lived spatial experience. I reflect on the use of walking interviews as a narrative methodology, drawing upon research literature and my own experiences and questions of the method. The paper closes with theoretical perspectives on space and narrative (Massey, 2005, De Certeau 1984). I use these works to ask critical questions about the interplay between narrative, space and writing, ultimately arguing for more attention to the spatial in narrative research, and in research narratives.

Paper

This paper begins with the argument that space and place are fundamental to discussions of Higher Education (HE), from the levels of student experience to national policy. The basis of this argument comes from my research on students studying college-based HE in English Further Education (FE) colleges. Falling uneasily between the remits of two government departments, HE provision in FE works on a policy boundary between a marketised logic of HE and the streamlining imperative of current FE action. HEFCE's mapping of HE provision in the UK contrasts the positive 'warmer' areas in which there is more provision, to 'cold spots', in which there is less (HEFCE 2015). This mapping connects the places and spaces of the UK with the model of choice and marketisation in which more is better, and less is 'cold'. In contrast, current area-based reviews (BIS, 2015) of English FE are seeking to ensure that colleges are not replicating their provision unnecessarily, and working instead to recommend that colleges merge to form 'fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers' (ibid. p. 3). These contradictory understandings of the relationship between place and provision are compounded by the fact that they each rely on a prescribed definition of the 'local', in which boundaries are drawn based upon travel mileage or city limits. Such prescription belies the extent to which individual mobility, and therefore proximity to 'local' HE provision is inextricable from classed, gendered and raced subjectivities and structures (Massey, 1994; Massey, 2005; Taylor, 2012). The definitional politics of place are further implicated in HE in FE provision in the common FE college practice of marking out a building or building section for their HE students alone. The commonality of this marking out of space across English FE colleges that provide HE is suggestive of the powerful constitutive nature of student space. It creates an implicit, commonly understood connection between the conceptual and the spatial distinction of HE from FE. In my research,

which looks at student narratives of studying HE in FE, individual negotiations of these multiple constructions and understandings of space and place are both important and difficult to collect.

Given the complexity, multiplicity and urgency of issues of space, place and locality to the HE in FE context, this paper therefore addresses and provokes methodological questions related to the study of space. I highlight the problematic dissonance between space and place as they are physically experienced and understood, and methods of data collection and research writing which must incorporate them into written forms and structures. I look first at literature on walking interviews (see, for example, Evans and Jones, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2008), and I reflect upon my use of the walking interview technique in my fieldwork with students of HE in FE. The walking interview methodology allows participants to respond to questions about their spatial environment while moving through it, so that they performatively occupy places as they speak about them. I argue that in many ways, this approach to interviewing is useful in that participants articulate narratives of space and place both bodily and verbally. Seen in terms of my research project, it allows me to explore the ways in which overarching policy definitions of place, alongside the multiple, intersecting inequalities of space and mobility, are implicated in narratives of spatial experience. In short, this methodological approach has the potential to draw out narrative occupation of space and place just as narrative interviewing draws out the narrative construction of subjectivity (Ricoeur, 1992). Nevertheless, there are possible problems with this method. For example, if the narrative data are recorded, transcribed, analysed and represented in traditional academic structures, is the physical occupation of space from which the narratives stem lost? In the absorption of participant voice into researcher voice that is common to all academic writing, (Jackson and Mazzei, 2009; Mazzei and Jackson, 2012), does research into spatial narratives have something more substantial to lose?

In order to think through the relationship between space and the discourses that construct our understandings of it, I turn to theorisations of space in the final part of the paper, using these to reflect further upon spatial narrative methodologies. The complex discursive matrix constructs the spaces, places and localities of HE in FE, as outlined above, make it clear that space is far from the given, external physicality as it is commonly understood (Massey, 2005). De Certeau (1984) argues that our occupation of space is rooted in the sequential nature of narrative, and that places are named and negotiated through multiple acts of storytelling that draw on the boundary-making practice of territorial founding myths. These conceptualisations of space and place see the experience of space as a performative, narrative act that negotiates multiple, layered intersecting stories of inequality and (dis)advantage. Seen in this way, a walking narrative interviewing method exaggerates, rather than isolates, the spatial negotiation that is involved in any narrative act. These theorisations, which suggest both that occupation of space is narrative, and, reciprocally, that storytelling is inherently spatial, lead me to two final methodological questions in this paper. The first concerns walking interviews, and asks whether the attention to the spatial in this methodology risks implying that other narrative methodologies are non-spatial. This turns the problem of representing space in writing on its head, suggesting instead that space is always implicated, if often ignored, in all forms of narrative representation. The second question continues the focus on research writing. I ask whether De Certeau's claim that all narratives are 'spatial stories' (1984, p. 115) has the potential

to draw attention to common practices of narrative boundary making in narrative representations of research participants, contexts and spaces.

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