

# Reconceptualising 'spaciality' in professional learning in English higher education settings with a church heritage.

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## Background

The concern of this paper is the interplay of dialogue, space and professional learning in the context of faith-based higher education settings in England. The paper explores and discusses the conceptual arguments and is informed by empirical data. The overall aim is to develop a conceptualisation of 'spaciality' and to advance understandings of the dynamic interplay of space and place, underpinned by thinking drawn from the literature including the work of Gadamer (2013) and Buber (1947) amongst others.

The research explores the dialogic spaces in academic life and the interplay of 'space' and 'place' in the professional learning of academics in these settings, each with Christian roots. In the market environment of higher education we are curious to explore the apparent tensions when dialogue and the relational aspects of academic life co-exist with other aspects of academic life including for example a culture of academic individualism with regard to research and scholarship and 'making a name for oneself' (Light et al. 2009:40). As Nixon (2004:119) suggests, we live in a world of public and private pluralities and this research aims to make sense of the linkages between these worlds and the interplay of relationships, dialogic spaces and contexts and the conditions for professional learning. Buber (2002) talks of 'becoming aware' when someone speaks to us in ways that have an effect on us such that their speech enters our lives. 'In the house of speech' says Buber, 'there are many mansions, and this is one of the inner' (p11). A life of dialogue is a lived unity (Buber, 2002:29) and the potential of dialogue to unite academic life across the divided spaces will be explored through this project.

## Methodology

This paper is more conceptual and theoretical in nature, however empirical data is drawn on to inform our conceptualisation of spaciality.

The research began from a number of questions:

What learning spaces do academics inhabit? Are they spaces for solitude or for company and dialogue with others? What is the nature of the experience of being in these spaces?

How do academics enter these spaces and how do they contribute to being an academic?  
What are the boundaries and how do they shift?

What is the relationship between 'space' and 'place' in these institutions?

What new kind of 'spaces' are created when people, places, spaces and dialogue combine?

What are the practical implications for the intellectual life of the university?

The empirical data is collected through asynchronous narrative email accounts which allow respondents to reflect over time. This is followed by face-to-face interviews in each setting to situate the discourse within the physical location (James and Busher, 2009), an important consideration for research of this nature with its concerns with 'space', 'place' and 'dialogue'.

These approaches to data collection are seen to be consistent with our conceptual underpinning in philosophical hermeneutics and the work of Gadamer because as James and Busher (2009:13) noted, hermeneutics 'trusts in the potential of language (conversation) and interpretive practice to disclose meaning that emerges within the dialogic encounter'.

### **Conceptual arguments**

The paper offers a conceptualisation of the topography of 'spaces' and their features including formal and informal spaces, physical and virtual, solitary and communal, personal reflective and social relational. The features and texture of these spaces and the experience of inhabiting them will be unpacked and thinking developed about the power and mutuality of space, place, thoughts and words in the construction of other spaces where we may begin to develop new understandings and to think differently. Participants' understandings of the experience and 'spirit' of dialogue in these spaces will be examined with reference to Bohm (1996). Bohm understood dialogue at the deeper level and in terms of thinking about the thought processes behind the assumptions we make and as process of making meaning through participation in thinking together. Bohm (1996:7) suggested that 'even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of dialogue is present' and it is this spirit of dialogue which will provide one frame of reference. Buber's idea of the mutuality of speech and inner action suggests that there may be ideas to explore regarding dialogue not just in its outward form, but also the synergy with the inward dialogue.

To develop this conceptualisation further, the work of Gadamer (1977, 2004 in Nixon, 2012) on dialogue and the interpretation and shaping of understanding and meaning in his philosophical hermeneutics, is drawn on. Ryszard Kapuscinski (2008) and 'philosophy of dialogue' and 'Otherness' is applied not in terms of intercultural relationships but to develop our understanding of the individual self in encounters with others in dialogic spaces. Reflecting on Tischner and Levinas, Kapuscinski refers to an understanding of dialogue as a meeting, an encounter, an 'act of turning towards the Other, coming out to meet him, entering into conversation with him' (p73). Dialogist philosophers including Buber further develop our understanding of relationships between space, inner and outer dialogues. Levinas (1991) offers us ways of thinking about what the academics in our research study give to and receive from encounters in these spaces where thought and talk

with others may enrich understandings, challenge and change ideas and contribute to the development of professional learning. The backdrop for these encounters is higher education institutions with a Church foundation and the conceptualisation of place may have links to ethos and its influence on the intellectual and academic life of these institutions.

### **Implications of the study**

This research explores academics' understandings of the role of dialogic interaction in different 'spaces' in contributing to their professional learning in these settings with shared Christian roots. The concern is specifically with the nature of relational spaces in these faith foundation settings and the complex interplay of social, religious, cultural, institutional, structural, historical, geographical and political influences on spaciality. The implications of participation in the plurality of discourse and its relationship to learning in the different 'spaces' of academics' professional lives are drawn out and may suggest directions for further research in other higher education settings.

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