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Navigating the boundaries between home, work and school. Teaching values and literacies in VET

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ABSTRACT

Students in VET encounter complex demands when navigating across contexts. This study explores how teachers can support such students in navigating literacy practices and values across contexts. A teacher and a teacher educator constructed a third space for the exploration of academic, vocational, and out-of-school values and literacies. Data were derived from diary entries, e-mails, field notes, and an interview. Findings suggest that the construction of a third space requires processes of mapping, embodying, and brokering, and that both teachers and students can benefit from this approach, particularly in VET.

1. Introduction

A key challenge for teachers in vocational education and training (VET)/career and technical education (CTE) is the multi-site and poly-contextual nature of such programs. Students traversing various learning sites typically require a range of strategies to adapt to discrepancies between norms, values, and expectations (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). Studies of work-based learning emphasize that the tacit and implicit forms of understanding related to practice are as important as the explicit demonstration of achievement through symbolic languages; what counts as knowledge therefore is enacted through embodied doing just as much as it is expressed on conventional tests (Sefton-Green, 2013, p. 25). The notion of boundary crossing in VET has therefore attracted interest among educators and policymakers aiming at disrupting the academic-vocational divide and creating innovative pedagogical approaches to support VET students (Harreveld & Singh, 2009).

Moreover, teachers in VET are often responsible for students who are economically or educationally disadvantaged. These students constitute a heterogeneous population, are not always able to satisfy literacy demands in education, and may struggle with basic skills (Mellard, Woods, & Lee, 2016). Even though instructional techniques used with children can be adapted to adult learners, effectiveness has traditionally been measured by standardized assessments and not by the more ecologically valid functional outcomes associated with adult literacy (Hock & Mellard, 2005). Thus, for such adolescents there is a dearth of research on how to structure literacy education in efficient, effective, and motivating ways (Copeland, McCord, & Kruger, 2016).

The current study shows how a "third-space" approach can support teacher and student boundary crossing in a VET context. The article relates the narrative of a teacher attempting to create a third space in which discrepancies in and between home, academic, and vocational contexts can be explored. Specifically, by linking literacy practices across contexts to questions of values in and out of school, the study shows how teachers can mediate home, school, and vocational literacies and values. Outlining three pedagogical moves for boundary crossing between tacit and explicit understandings in academic and workplace learning, the study offers a conceptualization of the role of values and literacies in VET pedagogy.

Initially, I will discuss the concept of third space and its application in educational contexts, followed by a discussion of VET as a

third space. I will then present my research design and findings. Three key moves in the practical application of third-space theory will be presented: mapping, embodying, and brokering. Finally, I will discuss how VET for adolescents can be reimagined through the lens of third-space theory and what implication this may have for students and educators.

2. Third-space theory

2.1. Third space in critical theory and educational research

Boundaries occur both between and within the domains of work, school, and everyday life, and students encounter various kinds of boundaries between school and work practice forcing them "to relate to different values and norms and find their own position" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011 p. 138). For example, low-performing students in school can accomplish significant feats of literate problem-solving outside formal testing situations, suggesting that they have great potential for learning and participating in social contexts. This points out the importance of "persuasive examples of the necessity of attending to, building on, and incorporating the social, cultural, and linguistic resources that students bring to school" (Hull and Schultz, 2001, p. 593). The need to connect learning in school with out-of-school learning and activity without colonizing other cultural domains with adult values of academic achievement and success has been pointed out, where the suggested aim is rather that schools should build students' capacity by expanding and diversifying their interests, and by promoting equity and meaningful learning through values, relationships, and full participation in healthy communities (Ito et al., 2013). Researchers have therefore addressed the gap between learning in and out of school settings, the equity issues associated with this gap, and possible solutions for increasing student participation and engagement in learning across contexts (Leander et al., 2010; Moje, 2013; Phelan et al., 1991; Sefton-Green, 2013).

Attempting to re-imagine the role of space in learning, educational researchers have employed the notion of *third space*, a concept borrowed from critical theory. Soja (1996) finds space to be "real-and-imagined", arguing that spatial thinking must take into consideration our physical bodies and surroundings on the one hand, and the significance of representations of space on the other. Third space is a theoretical construct by means of which such an epistemological critique can take place. Criticizing the limitations of binary thinking, Bhabha (2004) argues for the need to appropriate and renegotiate the meaning of cultural symbols without polarizing or assimilating them. According to Bhabha (2004), third space is a space in-between singular categories, such as gender, generation, and institutional location, where cultural differences are articulated, and where a "terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" (p. 2) is created. Third spaces can therefore reveal new hybrid ways of signifying, destabilize previous notions of identity, and displace conventional narratives.

The concept has been employed by educational researchers in numerous contexts, including minorities (Lipka, Sharp, Adams, & Sharp, 2007), sexual orientation and gender identity (Mayo, 2013), intercultural contexts (English, 2005), teacher education (Skerrett, 2010; Williams, 2014; Zeichner, 2010), school-university collaboration and partnerships (Martin, Snow, & Franklin Torrez, 2011), relations between home/family and school literacies (Cook, 2005; Pahl & Kelly, 2005), and early childhood studies (Levy, 2008). It has also been applied in such disciplinary contexts as language and literacy (Cook, 2005; Maniotes, 2005), science (Richardson Bruna, 2009), mathematics (Lipka et al., 2005; Lipka et al., 2007), drama education (Greenwood, 2001), and music education (Johnson, 2011). However, third space is not a well-defined theoretical construct.

Some educational researchers envision third space primarily as a creative and socially aware dimension enabling researchers and practitioners to catch a glimpse of alternative possibilities for participation, practice, and self and social organization. Developmental work in a third-space perspective can therefore provide opportunities for professional creativity, inquiry, and learning (Hulme, Cracknell & Owens, 2009). Similarly, the term is loosely used in action research to represent a generative space suited for professional growth, collaboration, and reflection (Arhar et al., 2013). For example, Williams (2014) suggests using ongoing reflective journal writing as a tool for evolving the personal and professional identities of educators, developing new practices, and negotiating delicate relationships with others. In this sense, the act of writing itself may be considered the construction of a third space.

Others have emphasized the contested nature of third space, for example by characterizing classrooms as "polycontextual, multivoiced, and multiscripted" (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, & Tejeda, 1999, p. 287). Gutiérrez et al. (1999) suggest that tension and conflict in various learning activities can lead to a transformation in the activity and the participation and discourse practices therein. The use of multiple, diverse, and even conflicting mediational tools promotes the emergence of third spaces; the construction of such learning environments therefore entails mapping the activity system of official space on to the unofficial space, identifying discursive and social practices and a range of cultural and linguistic resources to be used in a learning context (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). Moje et al. (2004) identify three conceptualizations of the third-space construct in educational research: 1) as a bridge between conventional academic learning and other marginalized knowledges and discourses, 2) as a navigational space in which the crossing of discursive boundaries of specialized content areas opens for multiple funds of knowledge to be employed, particularly in secondary education, and 3) as a space of cultural, social, and epistemological change where both out-of-school and academic discourses and literacies are challenged and reshaped for the purpose of fostering new critical understandings. Accordingly, the concept of third space serves as a tool for a critique of the conventions of binary thinking (e.g. teacher vs. student, disciplinary vs. home literacies, vocational vs. academic learning) and as a possibility for renegotiating identities, relations, and practice. This is of particular value to researchers and practitioners seeking to manage or improve difficult situations in educational contexts (Brooke, Coyle, & Walden, 2005).

The permeable nature of third-space classrooms offers rich opportunities for research due to the connections between microprocesses at the classroom level and the wider personal and institutional contexts of both students and teachers (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). For example, literate practices and cultural devices are valued differently in spaces such as home, community, peer groups,