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“A relational approach to decolonizing education: working with the concepts of space, place and boundaries”.

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Source: Fran Martin

A relational approach to decolonizing education: working with the concepts of space, place and boundaries.

In this paper we examine the spaces and places in which education happens and the boundaries that are created around them, whether real or imagined. We begin by providing definitions of the ways in which we use these concepts, followed by an analysis of how they are understood and acted upon from within two alternative knowledge traditions – object-based/colonial and relational/decolonial (see the companion paper, Pirbhai-Illich & Martin, 2019). We then apply this analysis to formal education and the classroom space arguing that currently classroom spaces, places and boundaries are dominated by colonial ways of knowing and being. We conclude by offering some ideas about how educational spaces might be decolonized.

Space, place and boundaries

Space has many meanings and in the context of this paper we use it to refer to the social, material (physical environment) and esoteric (spiritual) spaces that support the relationships that are integral to any classroom. Spaces are created in **places**, the latter of which are sometimes referred to as points on the earth's surface, or locations, such as a province in Canada, a town within that province and so on. Places each have a unique set of characteristics that are determined by the coming together of intricately intertwined elements, processes, and relationships that are always in flux (McGregor, 2004). Space and place are therefore closely connected ideas that do not really make sense in isolation because they are always in constant relation with each other – the construction of spaces gives character to places and the social and/or physical location of a place can influence the types of spaces that can be created. **Boundaries** serve to indicate the limits or bounds of spaces and places. Boundaries may be material (physical) such as the walls of a building, or socially constructed such as national identity, and these boundaries may serve to indicate who or what is included within the boundary and who or what is excluded.

The concepts of space, place and boundaries are not neutral and, in the following sections, we examine how they are understood and acted upon from two contrasting ways of knowing and being – object-based/colonial and relational/decolonial.

Object-based, colonial constructions of space, place and boundaries

In our previous paper (Pirbhai-Illich & Martin, 2019) we identified one of the characteristics of object-based/colonial thinking as creating a separation between the knowing subject (I/self) and the known object (It/other). This separation makes it possible to treat anything that is other to the subject as an object or a 'thing', which in turn makes it possible for the subject to rationally and objectively categorise those others/objects into groups (e.g. schools/not schools) with discrete boundaries according to their characteristics.

For example, if we think of a ***school as a place***, it may have a clear boundary (such as a wall or a fence) between it and the local area. It will also have clear boundaries according to the social use of space inside the school for example schools are divided into areas for playing (playground), learning (classrooms), movement (corridors) and so on. These areas are all clearly demarcated.



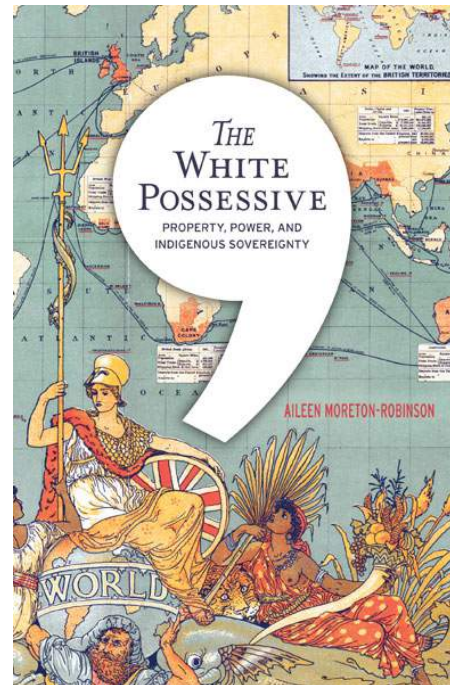
A school is also ***a space of social interaction*** and there are boundaries placed on who can legitimately be inside the school (students, staff, parents at certain times of the day) and who cannot enter into the school grounds or buildings. For those who have a legitimate place in the school, the spaces each can access will also be ‘bounded’ – for example, students will know that they cannot access the staffroom without some form of invitation. These may not be visible boundaries, but they are determined by both implicitly and explicitly understood societal norms – norms into which students become socialised as they start school, and as they move from one class / one school to another.

At school level the norms of the school community will differ from school to school because each headteacher will work in their own way with the staff to develop a school ethos and culture that is welcoming and inclusive for students and that aims to create a sense of belonging. Elements of a school’s ethos and culture will be visible (e.g. welcoming posters in different languages in the entrance hall; policy documents available online for staff and parents) while elements of it will be hidden (implicit in, for example, staff-student relationships). At class level the class teacher will similarly work with students to develop a class ethos and culture that reflects both that of the school and her/his own teacher identity.

This raises questions about whose cultural norms are the ones that form the basis of school and classroom communities and, as we argued in our previous paper (Pirbhai-Illich & Martin, 2019), the way of thinking that has come to dominate is the object-based, colonial tradition. For example, in Canada the governing structures at federal and provincial levels are dominated by white settler-colonial perspectives which in turn are historically based on European ideals and values. At the centre of the European colonial project was a relationship to land that treated it as a thing to be owned – i.e. treating it as property. The significance of viewing land as property to education is explored below.

Land and property as white¹ possessions.

On the face of it, anyone can own property including land. However two key factors affect property rights. The first is that what it means to 'own' something from the perspective of the object-based, colonial tradition is different to what it means from the perspective of the relational, decolonial tradition. The second is that, as we have already argued, it is the colonial tradition that the colonizers used to create a racialized hierarchy of peoples that placed white, Europeans as superior and non-whites as inferior. The significance of this is that, during the spread of colonialism across the world, land became a white possession in the service of the 'home' European nations. For the settler nations of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA, as they moved to independence land and property as white possessions became translated into nationhood and citizenship as white possessions. That is, the nation was created according to the image of those in power (white settler Europeans), and legally only those who were in possession of land had the right to vote and therefore the right to count as full citizens.



Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015)

These moves to create new nations and a citizenry as white possessions were violent forms of erasure of Indigenous peoples – of their culture and their ways of life because, in order to survive, people classed as 'non-white' were forced to take on white ways. One of the key tools by which white settlers achieved the erasure of other ways of being was education which, as we will show below, has been designed as a white, colonizing space. In addition, in settler nations such as Canada and Australia, education was used as a tool of erasure of Indigenous ways of being through the residential school system (Cote-Meek, 2014). First though, we examine how the concepts of space, place and boundaries are understood from within the relational, decolonial tradition.

Relational, decolonial constructions of space, place and boundaries

From a relational perspective, there is no separation of self from other – whether that be a human, more than human (spiritual) or non-human (material) other. All beings are interconnected and

¹ White here is not used as a way of describing individuals by their skin colour but is understood as a system that is structured to privilege people of white, Euro-western heritage. AnnLouise Keating states that whiteness cannot be conflated with white people and argues that it is dangerous to act 'as if racial categories are 'real' rather than socially constructed, and as if they are 'permanent, unchanging categories of meaning' (Keating, 1995 p. 910). See also this blog entry: <http://cosmologyofwhiteness.blogspot.com/2011/04/whiteness-and-white-privilege-paradigm.html>.

interdependent. For cultural groups whose ways of being are relational, such as people of Indigenous descent and Southern and Diasporic communities, there is no separation of self from community or community from land; connections extend to all living beings and matter, all of which are considered ‘relations’ (LaDuke 1999). Ownership and property are understood in the context of these relations, and lead to a communitarian sense of place and identity that includes living in harmony with the land. For example, in this extract Karen Dannemann explains what ownership means for Anishnaabe people:



Androgyny: Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau (1931-2007)

‘In our culture possession is viewed very differently [to its meaning in English]. Our teachers, for example, tell us that our children are not ours but are on loan to us. Our partners are on loan to us. Our homes, our canoes, our tools and equipment are on loan to us. Even the articles of our clothing are on loan to us. Our very bodies are on loan to us. We are very carefully taught that everything on loan to us must be cared for and then returned in the condition, or even better condition, than it was when we acquired it ... the words "my," "our," "your," "his" or "hers" refer to a relationship. When we say, "Trout Lake is my home," we do not mean that we own Trout Lake, that we possess it (and therefore you do not and neither does anyone else) but rather, it means that Trout Lake is that part of our great Mother the earth with which we have a very special relationship.’ (Haig-Brown and Dannemann 2002, p. 456).

Australians of Aboriginal descent refer to land as ‘country’ and describe country as a living, breathing entity:



Map: Me & My Father's Country: Ngarinyin Artist Jack Dale Mengenon (c.1920-2013).

“The land is the mother and we are of the land; we do not own the land rather the land owns us. The land is our food, our culture, our spirit and our identity.” Dennis Foley, a Gaimariagal and Wiradjuri man, and Fulbright scholar. When people talk about country it is spoken of like a person: we speak to country, we sing to country, we worry about country, and we long for country. “. . . *It is this knowledge that enables me to identify who I am, who my family is, who my ancestors were and what my stories are. We are indistinguishable from our country which is why we fight so hard to hang on.*” Catherine Liddle, Arrente and Luritja woman, and Aboriginal activist. (Common Ground, 2019).

From this perspective education is not a thing, but a relation – it is the learning that happens in the moment of interaction between people, and between people and their environments. From a

relational perspective, the focus is on the *space* and what it enables in terms of learning, rather than on the boundaries of that space (school or classroom). The spaces and places of education are therefore not contained within the school or classroom, nor are they separate from the wider community or society that staff and students are connected to. Individuals are also not tied to particular 'roles' – for example, anyone can be a teacher and anyone a learner. Teachers can learn from students, students can teach and learn from each other, teachers can be family or community members and other beings (trees, rivers, rocks, the earth) and so on. So spaces and places of education may have boundaries, but these boundaries will not be fixed nor will they be clearly demarcated because they will shift and change with each new relation.

The spaces, places and boundaries of education

What does this mean in practice? In the following sections we discuss how the two knowledge traditions affect teachers' practices and the spaces these create for educational relationships, focusing on power, identity and curriculum.

Power



Power

Is enacted in educational spaces and places
 Which potentially creates boundaries (permeable, rather than permanent)
 Which in turn determines the forms of relationality that are possible in that space



Colonial model

The teacher holds the power and enacts power through ownership of the space
 Which potentially creates boundaries between teacher and learner, and potentially learner and learner
 Which in turn imposes a type of social identity on the pupils (e.g. pupils know their place, they are compliant, they follow instructions)
 ALTHOUGH there is always the potential for resistance



De/colonial model

Power is shared between teacher and students
 Space is created for students' identities and knowledges, and to develop relationships
 Permeable, porous boundaries exist but they are not determined solely by the teacher
 Through relating to each other students have agency in finding their place

Figure 1: Colonial and de/colonial² enactments of power.

² We use the term de/colonizing with a slash to denote that there can never be a purely decolonizing space because such a space is always already in relation with, and only necessary because of the existence of colonizing forces. 'Therefore, de/colonizing denotes a movement within, in-between, and outside colonizing discourses and decolonizing desires' (Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 15)

As white possessions, we argue that schools and classrooms are organised in such a way as to maintain unequal power relations – to keep schools, classrooms, curriculum and methods of instruction culturally ‘white’, Euro-western. Power, by its very definition, is derived from the ability of certain people or groups in society to impose coercion. The imposition of white, Euro-western, colonial ways of ‘doing’ education is achieved explicitly (e.g. rules governing behaviour, timetables governing lessons) and implicitly (e.g. methods of instruction, teacher-student relationships, the hidden curriculum).

In an ideal world, the spaces and places teachers create would enable students to participate equally. The reality, though, is that education is governed by a system designed to privilege people of white, Euro-western, heritage and their object-based, colonial ways of being and knowing. As we argued earlier, education, schools and classrooms are white possessions and thus are set up to be welcoming to students whose identities and ways of being and knowing mirror those of the dominant, powerful group, while those whose identities and ways of being and knowing are different find educational spaces and places Othering, uninviting and inhospitable³. A relational, de/colonizing approach does not argue for a replacement or erasure of whiteness or coloniality because this would be colonization in another form. Instead, de/colonial approaches aim to expand and pluralise the identities, cultures, knowledges and instructional methods that are welcomed into classroom spaces and to put them into relation, as we discuss below.

Identity

Identity is at the heart of teacher-student relationships and as different identities come together and interact in the classroom space, this can be likened to intercultural interactions or relations. An *object-based* understanding of intercultural assumes that there are discrete cultural groups and these are often equated with nationality and/or race and ethnicity. A *relational* understanding of culture understands it in broader terms to include family, community, gender, organisation, religion and so on. Each of these groups will have fluid boundaries that change according to time and place and the socio-cultural, environmental contexts in which they have meaning. Therefore, any individual will have a unique identity that is a product of the differing socialisation processes of the groups to which they belong and the processes that take place at their intersections.



‘Intersectionality is an analysis related to identity, not an identity in itself. Systems of hierarchy have been created around our multiple identities, and the combinations (or intersections) of those systems affect how life goes for us. Some of these identities give us a leg up, while others push us a rung down the ladder. The combination of identities can compound (or diminish) advantage ... The point of intersectional practice is to look at all these possible combinations of privilege and vulnerability, rather than just stopping with the ones that apply to us, whoever we are’. (Sen, 2017).

³ For a full discussion of what it might mean for education spaces to be inviting and hospitable please refer to our companion paper (Pirbhai-Illich & Martin, 2019).

From a **relational** perspective, therefore, it does not make sense of talk of educational spaces as spaces of inter- or intra-cultural interaction. Instead, they might be thought of as spaces of inter-*subjective* interaction the processes of which would be informed and influenced by individuals' multiple identities and their intersections, and the geo-political, historical contexts within which they are formed – that is, how people 'read' each other during their inter-subjective interactions will be informed by their worldviews. This is allied to the idea put forward by Paulo Freire (1970) that reading is not just about the ability to read (or hear) the **word**, but also the ability to read (or interpret) the **world**, by which he meant the worldviews giving meanings to the words.

Curriculum

The curriculum is also a white possession. For example, the division of knowledge into discrete disciplines or subjects was done by Europeans, with some disciplines (e.g. geography) being the direct result of colonialism and the need to map the world and name territories in order to own and control them (hence lands are described as being 'discovered' by European explorers rather than existing in their own right). Curriculum knowledge is further divided into an implicit hierarchy with English, math and the sciences being valued more than the humanities and creative arts, and there is a separation between academic knowledge (included in the formal curriculum) and home or community knowledges (not included in the formal curriculum). Important questions for teachers to ask themselves are therefore: Whose truths are represented in the curriculum? Whose knowledges are included and excluded? Whose ways of being are presented as superior and whose inferior?

An explicit understanding of the power of knowledge and whose truths are validated is an important first step towards de/colonizing the curriculum and opening up spaces for a more holistic, relational understanding of curriculum in which multiple knowledges are invited to interact with each other. Such a curriculum would come into being through those spaces of interaction and be authentic and meaningful to students because they would have a direct relation to their home and community funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et. al. 2005).

De/colonizing educational spaces, places and boundaries

When the concepts of binary, categorical, property-bound thinking are applied to education we can see **the coloniality of the classroom 'box'** – each class/box is separated from the others by four walls with a door, each school is separated from the community by a fence with a gate and a buzzer at the main door so people requesting entrance can be screened. The space for learning is therefore bounded and closed. Within classrooms, space and material resources (arrangement of desks, where the teacher is located in relation to students etc) are organised to produce hierarchical relations based on ideas of order, discipline and competition.

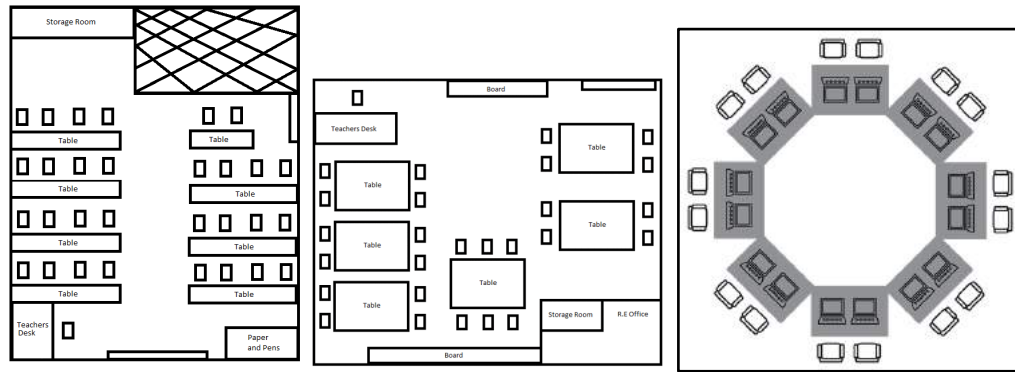
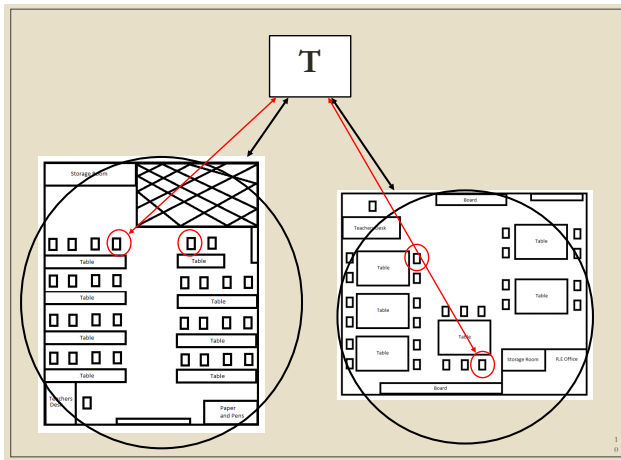


Figure 2: Classroom arrangements

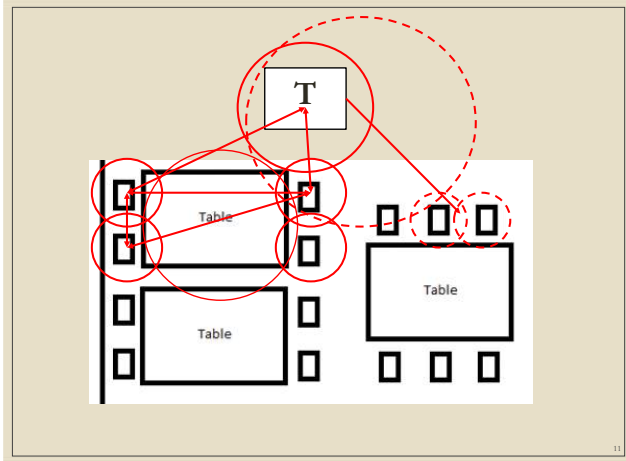
Figure 2 shows three alternative arrangements of tables, chairs and resources and although the classroom on the left is the most visibly hierarchical (there is a clear separation between the teacher's and students' spaces), any one of them is likely to produce hierarchical, I-It relations because the spaces, places and boundaries of education and the underlying ways of being and knowing they support are object-based (figure 3). In other words, the spaces, places and boundaries of schools and classrooms are white possessions. The power of this model is evident in the fact that it can be found in schools around the world, across nations and cultures.



- The teacher interacts with students as if they are a homogenous group (black circles). Everybody is treated as if they are the same.
- The teacher interacts with students as individuals (red arrows and circles). Here the teacher is working in a more thoughtful way to ensure that everyone can be successful. However, the teacher holds the power because her worldviews unconsciously influence those

Figure 3: Colonizing, coercive educational interactions

It might seem that, because the physical, material arrangements of schools and classrooms are currently organised according to a box-like mentality, that the spaces for learning and teacher-student relations will be similarly bounded. However, we argue that this is not the case. Even within a bounded space it is possible for teachers to create a sense of openness through developing ways of working in which students feel they can participate and that their knowledges and ways of being are invited into the classroom and taken up in the teaching (figure 4).



- A variety of interactions are evident: teacher-student, student-teacher and student-student. Over time, as everyone gets to know each other, the boundaries between people, their ways of being and their knowledges become more permeable.
- This critical intersubjective space is a space for interaction to learn with each other about each other that is consciously attentive to how power is enacted.

Figure 4: De/colonizing, reciprocal educational interactions

As McGregor states:

‘Thinking in this way ‘outside the box’ allows a dynamic and politicised understanding of space, and challenges the view of places such as schools as pre-existing and bounded, replacing it with an open conception of place as hybrid, provisional and porous. Social relations are understood as relations of power, but where power is not a thing to be possessed, rather residing in small, local interactions, power ‘with’ rather than ‘over’ (McGregor, 2004, p. 14).

The classroom space is, from the perspective of the student, ‘owned’ by the teacher. Due to the legal contract that governs the teacher, s/he does not have a choice over whether the students cross the threshold into the classroom, but s/he does have a choice over whether to create a relationship that ‘is not primarily whether or how to include or exclude those who are not the same as ‘us’, but embraces the possibility of keeping open the question of *who the other is*’ (Langmann, 2014, p.112 italics in original). For teachers this means becoming explicitly aware of not only one’s own worldviews but also the dominant social norms that govern behaviour and their influence on educational relationships. Teachers cannot abandon all claims to property, or the learning environment, but s/he can approach the educational relationship with the intention to be unconditionally inviting and hospitable, to create spaces for inter-subjective interactions in which s/he has, and fosters in students, an orientation that attends to otherness, listening and learning, valuing and honouring the ways of being, doing, knowing and valuing that the students bring with them.

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