

RESPONSE

The experience of learning in space and time

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Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to engage with the Proposition by Roel Rutten (2014) and applaud the scope this piece provides for us to consider further some of the challenges embedded in learning as a dynamic, emergent, complex process. I will engage with the essay by outlining three issues. Firstly, I will offer a constructive critique in relation to the main thesis and the perspective Rutten's analysis provides on our ongoing efforts to understand learning as a complex phenomenon. Secondly, I will elaborate on the ways in which we can understand learning in relation to time and space by offering an expansive appreciation of learning as space/*choros*,¹ not just a process taking place in particular contexts/spaces. Finally, I will conclude with the implications of this perspective.

A critique of 'learning in socio-spatial contexts'

My reading of the essay by Rutten prompts me to elaborate on two main issues I feel merit further consideration in making the case for learning in socio-spatial contexts. My critique will be constructed around (1) the way learning and space are defined respectively, and their relationship conceptualized, and (2) the way individuals and social context are connected in relation to learning.

The Proposition's opening remarks set out clearly the focus on individual learning. This acknowledgement that learning and knowing are primarily processes that engage social actors but also inform social collectives (be they organizations or other dimensions of social interaction) is well established in the current organizational learning and knowledge management field, not just theoretically (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Kim, 1993) but also empirically (Antonacopoulou, 2001, 2006). This undisputed 'fact', however, provides another reminder of the etymological route of the word 'individual', which means both one and unique and an undivided part of the

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social whole. Hence, for me at least, there was little need to be convinced of the connections between self and others in terms of social context as it has already been recognized that context is more than just a container for social practices and values to be formed, performed and transformed (Antonacopoulou, 2010a).

That said, it is the Proposition's focus on contextualizing knowing and learning that merits further reflection and elaboration. To acknowledge the tacitness of knowing is not new, nor is the subjective nature of knowing more generally. However, to render context as 'sticky' merits further elaboration, particularly if this sheds more light on the spatial dimensions of learning. This prompts me to observe an absence of any engagement with the literature on space. There are several useful contributions worth drawing on, especially in the broader management and organization studies literature (see Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Vince, 2011; Fahy *et al.*, 2014; Hernes *et al.*, 2013). An engagement with the literature on space more broadly (see Lefebvre, 1991; Latour, 1997) could also help clarify at the most basic level whether context seen as space provides a particular lens for understanding learning itself, given the way learning is defined in Rutten's essay ('a process of social interaction in relations of individuals and the creation and diffusion of knowledge in these relations').

The core argument constructed in the Proposition presents space as a *topos* – a concrete place where learning occurs. It is this topographic orientation towards space and learning that I would argue needs further exemplification to understand the relational and, I would add, emergent nature of learning to which we need to pay more attention. The argument that embeddedness and social capital are key aspects of the relational character of learning is again unsurprising. Indeed, networks (be they professional or social) provide a 'working net' of relationships that influence what, how and why learning may or may not take place, when and where it takes place, if it takes place. In my view, however, informed by much of my ongoing empirical work on learning practices in organizations, the explanation of willingness and ability to learn being fostered by more open and inclusive networks is too simplistic to reflect the struggle underpinning learning. I call it struggle or crisis in learning (see Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer, 2014) because I want to stress the power and political forces that shape such networks and form the core of the social context, a point that is not sufficiently elaborated in Rutten's essay. These forces have already been examined in the organizational learning and knowledge management literature (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Nicolini *et al.*, 2003; Lawrence *et al.*, 2005; Antonacopoulou and Chiva, 2007).

Beyond the social-political forces however, few studies of learning and knowing fully account for the internal conflict individuals experience when learning (see Antonacopoulou, 2006). This is not just a matter of political tensions or the friction of geographical distance. The struggle I have in mind is the crisis experienced in learning in time and space. This struggle is endemic to learning and is experienced by all learners to different degrees. It is not so much related to what type of learning they engage in, but to the way they experience learning in the first place. Hence, I find the claim by Rutten that knowledge workers are in any way immune to such a struggle unconvincing, not because it is unsubstantiated (theoretically or empirically), but because the modes of learning presented as either deliberate or the result of routine interactions do little to account for the space learning creates, and the space learning could be conceptualized as becoming. It is to this issue that I turn my attention next.

Learning, time and space

When we explore learning in time and space, we come closer to understanding the nature of learning as a human activity. Human existence is shaped by the way we engage with time and space in relation to the actions we take, and these actions in turn predispose us to appreciate the intimate relationship between time and space. To speak of time without a sense of space is like being without becoming. To echo Fortunati's (2001, p.4) claim, 'our bodies represent our first extension in space and the span of life, our being in time'. The very awareness of time in terms of past, present and future, and of one's temporary presence, are central features of human existence (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Urry, 1991, 2000). The socially constructed nature of time and its meanings across space, culture and history, as Whitrow (1997) demonstrates, reflect the Kantian and Bergsonian notion that humans are involved in the production of structures of the world (such as time and space) so that these can serve the purposes for which we employ them. Therefore, humans create space and time to serve the purposes they define for them, and are also made of space and time in the way being reflects the emergent patterns of movement in living (i.e. becoming). Therefore, it can be argued that the essence of time and space is not their existence *per se*, but their possibilities and potential when they join with other structures to create the impression of organization we experience in our lives. This point finds support in Latour's (1997) conceptualization of time and space offering a measure for each other, making it hard to separate them. Spacing and timing, he explains, provide meaningfulness to acting because acting reveals their intensity.

The intensity of spacing and timing in relation to acting is a powerful way of capturing the duality of structure and agency in the learning process. It is fundamental to acknowledge that while human agents are at the epicentre of learning, they are also the structure, which influences the degree of learning. As Bauman (2000, p.5) argues, 'Rigidity or order is the artefact and sediment of human agents freedom. That rigidity is the overall product of "releasing the brakes": of deregulation, liberalization, "flexibilization", increased fluidity ...'. This point finds support in the analysis of López and Scott (2000, pp.3–5) of social structure which points to three independent and complementary aspects of the social: the institutional, the relational and the embodied. Institutional structure comprises 'those cultural or normative patterns that define the expectations that agents hold about each other's behaviour and that organize their enduring relations with each other'. Relational structure comprises 'the social relations themselves, understood as patterns of ... interconnection and interdependence among agents and their actions, as well as the positions they occupy'. Finally, embodied structure is 'found in the habits and skills that are inscribed in human bodies and minds and that allow them to produce, reproduce and transform institutional structures and relational structures'.

These social structures reflect learning in time and space as emerging from the interactions within, across and between agents forming the very structures of their interaction. This overall picture of processuality reminds us that agency is not restricted to the species or society of humans. Taking Whitehead's (1929) perspective, it could be argued that agency (actors/agents) can be anyone or anything – individual people, objects or events, as well as aggregate units such as groups, families, organizations – that contribute to the development of relations and interactions between actors. This point brings us back to Latour's emphasis on intensity, for if

we are to capture the dynamic nature of learning, which we now acknowledge comprises irreducible moments of becoming, we need to understand the intensity with which different times and spaces connect.

Learning in time and space opens up a wide spectrum of possibilities for readdressing both our language and understanding of learning. Time and space are central aspects of learning as an act that can provide further insights into the situated, relational and emergent nature of learning. Following in the footsteps of Foucault (1972), I make the case for conceptualizing learning as space, just as he asserted unperturbedly that knowledge is also the space. It is this emergence of learning that space provides the possibility to arrest.

The experience of learning: learning as space/*choros*

Introducing the perspective of learning as space is intended to allow us to speak of learning as a *choros* of multiplicity and possibility, and appreciate when learning is a cause, consequence and context for action. I do not seek here to introduce an analogy nor a metaphor in inviting us to appreciate learning as space. Instead, I seek to reveal dimensions of space that allow us to better appreciate the character of learning itself when experienced. Therefore, a clear distinction is drawn between learning as space and references to learning space (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Similarly the experience of learning must not be confused with references to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Reference to learning as a *choros* where action is formed and transformed allows us to enter into the flesh and blood of learning practice and begin to capture the experience of learning itself.

The experience of learning provides access to the ineffable signs that define the learning process and make learning also a possible outcome. To appreciate this possible lens demands attention to the *kairos* of learning. Here the focus on time is on the critical moments that shape how such issues as the timing, timeliness and timelessness of learning acquire significance. This section presents three dimensions of space that reflect the character of learning. In doing so, the discussion then explicates further how it may be possible to arrest the experience of learning through the lens of learning as space.

Space as action

In his view of space as ‘a space of representation’, Lefebvre (1991, p.41) defines space as the domain of action and the basis for action. This is Lefebvre’s third type of space, lived space, which encompasses both conceived spaces and perceived spaces. However, what is different in the lived space is that conceptions and perceptions lead to actions, and actions produce further perceptions and conceptions of space. In other words, reference to lived space emphasizes the interdependency between being and becoming in that who and what we are is both the product of our being and also produces what we are capable of becoming. Space, therefore, when located in our actions, is both a product and a producer. It is simultaneously both the cause and the result, it is both actual and potential. Central to this view of space as action in the lived experience is the power of space to create multiple connections and possibilities.

Space as multiplicity and specificity

... space is not the setting [real or logical] in which things are arranged, but the means. ... that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they all have in common we must think of it as the universal power enabling things to be connected. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.243)

Therefore, space is not only a place where events take place, but also makes a place for these events to happen (Casey, 1997, p.312). Along similar lines, Serres (1995, p.116) defines space as ‘a ... multiplicity ... It is always necessary ... to have a certain redundancy in order for a space to be thinkable’. Serres explores the way in which multiplicity is constituted (1991, p.102): ‘The [multiplicity] ... is unable to form unless this element I have called the quasi object [like a Joker in a card game] circulates within it ... the object moving in a multiplicity constructs these relations and constitutes [it] ...’.

Space can be conceived as a multiplicity, which contains a set of relations between things without being a thing itself. This very point is what allows multiplicity to be also specificity when relationships between elements within the system are specific to the space in which they find expression. This point finds support in Latour’s (1997) reference to ‘spacificity’ to explain situatedness, and is echoed by Serres (1995, p.29) in explaining redundancy: ‘The unique relationship between two singular units reveals specificity in space’. Serres goes on to point out that ‘every spatial arrangement (like the identities to be found within it) is always one *actuality* out of an *infinite number of possibilities*’ (original emphasis).

Space as journey

As a noun space also means freedom and liberation. It suggests there is a permanent flow and emergence that finds expression as things unfold and as experiences present possibilities for drawing connections previously not considered. This view of space as liberation emphasizes the fluidity of space without permanent appropriation akin to the cosmological view of space as infinite. Space in this respect is about freedom of movement and movement in space may well reflect freedom as a spatial fact.

It is this movement that reflects a journey as more than a beginning and an end. Such a journey allows us to appreciate the transcendence of space and time as we travel though life and experience the multiplicity of possibilities. This movement and travelling, however, akin to Ulysses’ journey to Ithaca, involve pain and suffering, but also pleasure and enjoyment. The desire to know and curiosity of the unknown provide the energy to delve into unexplored spaces.² There is an art to travelling, because the way we chose to travel is a reflection of the ways we engage in the quest of making our lives [beyond the constraints of work, and the struggle for survival, as De Botton (2002) proclaims] meaningful. It is in this search for meaning that our life-project revolves around and it is in its pursuit that the human flourishing is possible. In travelling, there is anticipation just as much as there is surprise and in Yann Martel’s (2003) *Life of Pi*, the travelling (fictional or not) is as much about whether the events happened for real, as about the curiosity of discovering the human spirit in the challenges experienced. In travelling, we are exposed to tensions that swing us between the real and unreal, the expected and unexpected.

Space as journey, therefore, entails both pain and pleasure as every movement involves a letting go in order to embrace new realities and new horizons.

Learning as space

These three dimensions of space as action, multiplicity and journey allow us to appreciate many of the dimensions of learning that are hardly considered in much learning literature. Through these dimensions of space, we can appreciate learning as lived in action and as forming the basis for action; learning as both abstract and specific at the same time, because of the multiple possibilities it entails; learning as both objective and subjective, embedded and reflective of the dominant discourse; learning as order and censorship in the same way as it is negotiation and struggle. Finally, no learning journey ever has only one destination and there is always a need for an emotional connection to make learning personally meaningful (see Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001).

Fundamentally, however, what makes learning a space is the way all these dimensions contribute to forming a complex set of connections – a *symplegma* – among the content, process and context of learning. In this sense, our analysis of the relationship among learning, time and space seeks to capture the *symplegmatic* nature of learning as a temporal relational, social space, which essentially propounds its emergent nature.

This relational view of learning and of space (see Lefebvre, 1991) brings into closer focus the importance of connections and possibilities in multiplicity. Therefore, social spaces are spaces of order and struggle, but at the same time they are also radically open and full of endless possibilities. This lies at the core of ‘Learning in crisis’ (Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer, 2014) – a mode of learning that recognizes the emergence and emergency in learning practices, not just in periods of crisis, but also in our going engagement with the unknown. This engagement with the unknown is central to practising, itself founded on repetition where possibilities are born (see Antonacopoulou, 2008).

Learning within organizations is both a process of organizing the what, how and why one learns in the context of the institutional identity one maintains, but at the same time any process of learning opens up dimensions beyond one’s initial orientation. This point captures the element of surprise that emerges in the learning process when there is space for learning to be driven, not by the objective of addressing social obligations, but by the curiosity to delve into the unknown. This suggests that the very process of learning can be an experience which teaches one lessons beyond those that would neatly fit into a crude categorization of learning intentions and outcomes. Learning above all is a *symplegma* – a space of living, of acting, of being and becoming. It is simultaneously both the cause and result, not because of the experiences as reference points for noticing that learning is taking place, but because of the ways in which the experience of learning is engaged.

The experience of learning therefore, transcends time and space. It de-temporalizes and de-territorializes learning so that the when and where map out the ‘landscape’ and ‘timescape’ of learning as an emerging process. Schama’s (1995) notion of landscape seeks to capture the intersection where stories, myths, memory and obsessions meet, thus reflecting landscape as embedded in cultural tradition. Therefore, landscape signals the social morphology in its multiple manifestations and specific illustrations as different elements connect. Along similar lines, Adam’s (1998) idea of

timescape is proposed as the intersection between diverse tempos, timings and rhythms thus locating timescape in the emergent changes and contingencies which provide different timescales for different participants. This suggests that different landscapes create, and are created by, different timescapes. Therefore, the experience of learning embraces the interdependence between time and space, and reflects the landscape and timescape of individual and collective learning in action, for action and from transaction.

Learning as space is not about filling that which is empty. Instead, it is about discovering the intensity of the experience of learning to create connections when and where these were not thought possible. Learning has the capacity to create time and space, because it is a *choros* full of possibilities that can be realized when all that constitutes learning comes together in defining the nature of learning at that particular moment in time. It is this appreciation of, and alertness to, critical moments that merits consideration if we are to capture the timing, timeliness and timelessness of learning (see Antonacopoulou, 2010b).

The experience of learning draws attention to the ways in which we become alert, energized, awake and attentive, when we are able to see things differently because we no longer operate by logic or emotion alone. Neither rationality nor emotion are sufficient to account for the liberating feeling. This sense of freedom to be authentic as one experiences learning to *feel safe being vulnerable* lies at the core of learning. It is a sense of freedom that is akin to the degree of autonomy that Deci (1995, p.209) refers to when he explains human freedom as the 'experience of choice ... to act autonomously in relating to the world around, ... behave authentically on behalf of some general good'. He goes on to explain that

... neither compliance nor defiance represents authenticity, and neither represents responsibility. To defy what authority says just because authority says it, is to be irresponsible. But in a quite profound sense, it is also true that to comply with authority just because it is authority is to be irresponsible

In this sense, human freedom is about the responsibility to face up to vulnerabilities and feel safe/free to be and become one's self. There is a clear challenge when the very systems that foster learning (be they educational institutions or other fora for learning, such as training and development in organizations) do little to create the space and time for learners to experience learning in their own terms. This is where the potential for lasting impact also lies and it is where our commitment to learning ought to be (Freire, 1972). Then and only then might we be able to appreciate learning as the liberation of knowledge and the organic growth of the individual (Antonacopoulou, 1998).

In summary, if we are to appreciate learning in a spacio-temporal social context, we need to understand the relationship among learning, time and space, particularly in terms of what this means for individuals and collectivities. To this end, we would do well to start by engaging with learning and knowing, both as actualities manifested in actions, and as abstractions located in our being and becoming. Instead of looking to manage and control learning and knowing, we can engage with their abstractness as a space for discovering the wider possibilities they provide, rather than simply limiting them to pre-defined events or specific behavioural outcomes. In this sense, abstractness is about engaging with learning as part of the cosmos, as an experience, but not necessarily a process in time. It is a form of life that finds

meaning in the connections it affords with agencies and orders around it and which emerges from orders and agencies inside it, beyond it and before it in the messy complex, the *symplegma*, in which it is embedded and which it reflects.

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Notes

1. In the Greek language a distinction is drawn between *topos* and *choros* in describing space/place, in the same way as there is a distinction between *chronos* and *kairos* in describing time. These distinctions are intended to distinguish between concreteness and abstractness.
2. Homer's *Odyssey* reflects one of the earliest forms of knowledge sharing through myth and narrative. It stands as a timeless piece, reflecting humanity's voyage into the unknown. Ulysses symbolizes humanity's desire for knowledge. The desire to know is what makes humanity human. The thirst for knowing is what attracts humanity to the unknown, to discovery, to exploration, and to creativity. Obscurity and mystery draw knowledge into realization. The desire to know is the desire to transgress boundaries. It is the hope and the belief in the 'other'.

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