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Reclaiming Location in Education: A Response to the COVID Pandemic

Abstract: The school shutdowns necessitated by the 2020 COVID pandemic have highlighted the importance of "located" education. A located education is not determined by medium or physical proximity. Instead, a located education acknowledges the limits of human understanding and sustains mutually beneficial relationships. Recent neoliberal reform efforts have sought to dis-locate education – to strip it of both spatial limitation and the obligations of interdependent care. However, the COVID-related shutdowns have highlight the brokenness of a dis-located education. Drawing from the work of activist Wendell Berry and philosopher Nel Noddings, this article makes the case for located education – an education that recognizes the importance of both place and people.

Keywords: school shutdowns, located education, dis-located education, interdependence

摘要 (杰里米·德拉马特：教育地点的恢复：冠状病毒大流行的答案)：2020年新型冠状病毒大流行所导致的学校停课凸显了“定位”教育的重要性。一项定位教育并非由中等的或物理上的接近所决定的。取而代之的是定位教育承认人类理解的局限性并维持互惠互利的关系。最近进行的新自由主义改革试图寻找错位教育，以摆脱空间限制和相互依存关照的义务。然而，与疫情有关的关闭突显了错位教育的终结。参考活动家温德尔·贝里 (Wendell Berry) 和哲学家内尔·诺丁斯 (Nel Noddings) 的著作，本文提出了定位教育的理由---一项认识到地点和人的重要性的教育。

关键词：学校停课，定位教育，错位教育，相互依存

摘要 (傑里米·德拉馬特：教育地點的恢復：新冠狀病毒大流行的答案)：2020年新冠狀病毒大流行所導致的學校停課凸顯了“定位”教育的重要性。一項定位教育並非由中等的或物理上的接近所決定的。取而代之的是定位教育承認人類理解的局限性並維持互惠互利的關係。最近進行的新自由主義改革試圖尋找错位教育，以擺脫空間限制和相互依存關照的義務。然而，與疫情有關的關閉突顯了错位教育的終結。參考活動家溫德爾·貝里 (Wendell Berry) 和哲學家內爾·諾丁斯 (Nel Noddings) 的著作，本文提出了定位教育的理由---一項認識到地點和人的重要性的教育。

關鍵詞：學校停課，定位教育，错位教育，相互依存

Zusammenfassung (Jeremy Delamarter: Die Rückgewinnung des Standortes im Bildungswesen: Eine Antwort auf die COVID-Pandemie): Die durch die COVID-Pandemie 2020 notwendig gewordenen Schulschließungen haben die Bedeutung der "Verortung" des Bildungswesens unterstrichen. Ein Bildungsstandort wird nicht durch die mittlere oder räumliche Nähe bestimmt. Stattdessen erkennt eine ortsgebundene Bildung die Grenzen des menschlichen Verständnisses an und erhält gegenseitig vorteilhafte Beziehungen aufrecht. Die jüngsten neoliberalen Reformbemühungen haben versucht, Bildung zu verorten - um sie sowohl von der räumlichen Begrenzung als auch von den Verpflichtungen einer interdependenten Betreuung zu befreien. Die COVID-bedingten Abschaltungen haben jedoch die Gebrochenheit einer verorteten Bildung deutlich gemacht. In Anlehnung an die Arbeit des Aktivisten Wendell Berry und des Philosophen Nel Noddings plädiert dieser Artikel für eine verortete Bildung - eine Bildung, die die Bedeutung sowohl des Ortes als auch der Menschen anerkennt.

Schlüsselwörter: Schulschließungen, verortete Bildung, verlagerte Bildung, Interdependenz

Резюме (Джеремі Деламартер: Возврат «локалізованої» концепції в освіті: відповідь на пандемію COVID 19): Закриття шкіл, викликане розповсюдженням коронавірусної інфекції, означило проблему місця «реалізації» освітньої діяльності. Цей локус визначається не через середню або просторову дистанцію. Замість цього «локалізований» освітній дискурс визнає межі людського розуміння і сприяє підтриманню взаємовигідних відносин. Невдачі неоліберальних реформ ставили задачею визначити місце освіти в системі координат, щоб звільнити його від всяких просторових обмежень і необхідності «взаємного» супроводження. Однак саме ковідні обмеження означили неспроможність такого підходу. С опорой на твори активіста Венделла Беррі і філософа Нелла Ноддінгса в даній статті упор робиться саме на значимість «міста»

принадлежности» образования. При этом автор исходит из того, что это такая форма образования, которая признает и значение пространства, в котором оно непосредственно реализуется, и значимость людей, инволвированных в данное пространство.

Ключевые слова: закрытие школ, локализованное образование, смещенное образовательное пространство, взаимосвязь

A topic as complicated as location in education cannot be fully addressed in a single article, no matter the talent and wisdom of the author. What follows must be read as a brief exploration of a fantastically complex topic.

As a scholar and advocate of located education, I have learned the importance of clearly defining my terms from the outset. I have also learned that it is sometimes more effective to define these terms in the negative: that is, it is sometimes easier to speak of what a thing is *not*. So let us begin by talking about the terms “location” and “located education” in the negative.

A located education is not necessarily tied to a school building. In his critique of American education, John Goodlad (1984) highlighted the rigidity of classroom geographies and their accompanying relationships: students confined to desks, learning confined to classrooms, teachers reduced to monitors, interaction reduced to the technocratic. Our very conception of school, he claimed, presupposes a set of physical and social institutions that mandate hierarchical relationships between students and teachers. An appeal for located education, however, is *not* an appeal for the classrooms described by Goodlad, nor is it an appeal even for the physical school building itself. Although located education may certainly take place within the walls of a typical school building, the physical and institutional structures of the place we call “school” are neither sufficient nor necessary for education to be “located.”

Additionally, a located education is not the antithesis of online or remote education. On the contrary, online learning is no more or less likely to be located than learning that takes place in a physical classroom. Learning that is technologically mediated across physical and temporal distance has just as much potential to be located as does learning that takes place in a brick and mortar classroom. Indeed, in this sense, location is determined neither by medium nor by proximity.

The question then remains: what does it mean for education to be *located*? If location is not a function of space or time, then what is it? For the purposes of this article, location is best understood as a function of bounded, interdependent relationships. In other words, education is located when it acknowledges the limits of human understanding and sustains mutually beneficial relationships. In short, education is located when both students and teachers recognize and maintain its ecological boundaries. This is a slightly different construct from “place-based” education, which focuses primarily on being placed within a specific physical environment (e.g. Gruenewald, 2003). Although “location” and “place” are related constructs, and although my use of “location” may at times overlap with others’ use of “place,” location is not limited to the physical environment. Thus, place-based education may be located, in this sense, but a located education is not necessarily place-based. The important differences between the two terms, and the relevance of location to education in a post-COVID 19 environment, are detailed below.

Recognizing Boundaries

The first decades of the 21st century have seen a rise in the educational desire to create “global citizens.” Such a goal, although well-intentioned, ignores the simple fact that “no one lives in the world in general” (Geertz, 1996, p. 259). To be located means in part the simple acknowledgement that I am *here* and not *there*. Located education, therefore, acknowledges the boundaries that separate this place from that place. Note that these are not value statements. No claims are made regarding the superiority of one place over the other or that *here* is better than *there*. Instead, located education merely acknowledges that human frameworks have limits. To educate for “global citizenship” is, in practice, impossible. By educating for everywhere, we are, in fact, educating for nowhere or for “placelessness” (Ralph, 1976), because “to be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere” (Casey, 1997, p. ix). Instead of attempting to

educate for all places (and, therefore, no place), located education both acknowledges and builds upon the limits and boundaries inherent in being *here* and not *there*.

These boundaries extend to the realm of what can be properly understood. Poet and activist Wendell Berry (2012) claims that the “globe” can only be understood statistically. It is beyond the scope of human relational knowledge:

The fact is that we humans are not much to be trusted with what I am calling statistical knowledge, and the larger the statistical quantities the less we are to be trusted. We don't learn much from big numbers. We don't understand them very well, and we are not much affected by them. The reality that is responsibly manageable by human intelligence is much nearer in scale to a small rural community or urban neighborhood than to the “globe.” (ibid., p. 25).

The limits to human knowledge, Berry claims, are local. That is, they are bounded by what can be known relationally. A local or located education is, in Berry's terms, relational. It stems from and fosters “affection,” which Berry describes as the ability to act responsibly towards the co-occupants of a space on their terms. In contrast, statistical knowledge is abstract, disembodied, and distant. This is not to say that it is meaningless or lacks utility. It is, however, to draw a clear distinction between the depths of knowledge afforded by learning that is located and that which is *dis*-located. Berry's caution is not against remote or distant knowledge, *per se*. Instead, he cautions against abandoning propriety of scale and the conflation of what can be known relationally with what can be known statistically. The boundaries of location are not obstacles to learning; instead, they are the very ingredients necessary for knowledge to deepen and flourish.

Recognizing Interdependence

In addition to foregrounding the boundaries of human knowledge and being, located education also recognizes the interdependent nature of human relations. Such interdependence is fundamental to flourishing communities, educational or otherwise. Educational philosopher Nel Noddings (2013) reminds us that education is fundamentally an exercise in interdependence, in which students and teachers engage with each other according to the tenets of relational care. To practice educational care involves knowing one's co-learners well enough to identify and respond to their needs, and it entails having deep enough relational bonds to ensure that each other's needs were actually met. This kind of mutual obligation cannot be practiced in no-place. It cannot be *dis*-located. Instead, the relational care imagined by Noddings is predicated on long-standing and ongoing relationships in which the carer and the cared-for enter into interdependent and mutually beneficial relations.

In practice, this ethic of care rejects competitive models of education in which my educational success is predicated on another's failure. Interdependence rejects the competitive and/or destructive metaphors that have recently come to define much of contemporary education (e.g., “Race to the Top”). Instead of adopting zero-sum models of education, located education insists that success is best understood inter-dependently, not individually; my personal success depends, in part, on your success. The boundedness of educational interdependence rejects the dichotomous winner/loser outcomes implicit in *dis*-located models.

The Threat of Dis-Location

The threat of *dis*-located education did not arise with the COVID crises. A well-documented goal of neoliberal educational reformers is the “disruption” of located models of education (e.g., Armstrong, 2016; Bell, 2019; Christensen, & Eyring, 2011; Dunagan, 2018; Jones-Schenk, 2014; Liu, 2013; Matkin, 2012). Such disruptions generally aim to distance students from “traditional” educational boundaries, such as the Carnegie unit, synchronous face-to-face classroom instruction, pre-determined curricular timelines, and so on. Once “*dis*-located” – that is, freed from the boundaries of location and interdependence – the individual student can move at her own pace and according to her own desires. In practice, this *dis*-located model means that “there is no waiting for slower-to-learn classmates to catch up” (Bell, 2019),

because the obligations of care no longer apply. The fewer localized and relational limits students have, the more they can achieve.

Fundamental to this formulation is the characterization of boundaries as a limiting factor in student learning. The practical and relational boundaries of human communities inhibit and stifle individual progress, and these boundaries can be transgressed though technological mediation. When learning can be conducted anywhere and at any time, location ceases to matter. When students can move unencumbered from institution to institution, assembling a course of study freed from a consistent set of values and perspectives, they are freed from the tyranny of being educated by *this* place. When curricula and time-lines can be algorithmically standardized to each student, there is no need to work in and with an educational community, because individuals learn best when unencumbered by communal spaces and obligations. Learning, it is claimed, is most effective when it is dis-located.

These disruptive reform efforts have earned a great deal of criticism, particularly in regard to their relationship to corporate profit (e.g., Baltodano, 2012), their gutting of public education (e.g., Attick, & Boyles, 2016), and their over-reliance on contingent faculty (e.g., Gallagher, 2014). Although these critiques are well-deserved, they are insufficient. These attempts to dis-locate education must be challenged at the presuppositional level. Specifically, we must challenge the assumption that locational and relational boundaries are roadblocks to learning. Indeed, we must assert the opposite: learning communities flourish not when they are dis-located but rather when they are *bounded*. They flourish when they are located.

A New Hope

Perhaps the most important realization (or, more accurately, *re-realization*) to emerge from the rapid shift to online classrooms in the spring of 2020 is that education is fundamentally a located activity. In the scramble to cobble together some sort of online learning system, the default question for many educators seemed to be “how can I deliver content most effectively?” This led many teachers to create digital storerooms where students could retrieve materials when time and opportunity allowed. To be fair, many teachers had no choice. In western Washington state, where I live, many school districts forbade teachers from delivering content synchronously, and a number of teachers were compelled to use Google Classroom or Microsoft OneNote for asynchronous content delivery, even for kindergartners. Many teachers were unable to or prohibited from creating meaningful, contextualized instruction or from responding to their students’ learning needs in caring ways. The result was nightmarish, and, if nothing else, it served to reinforce the understanding that generic, de-contextualized, and dis-located education not only fails to educate, but it often actively harms the very people that we are meant to serve.

Students, teachers, and educational administrators are becoming acutely aware of both the humanistic and instructional values of location. I argue that students and teachers being located together, regardless of medium, is a profoundly richer and more meaningful experience than the mass-distributed delivery models advocated by neoliberal reformers. Recent surveys of the students at my university reveal that the hasty move to online education has significantly *increased* students’ desire to physically return to campus in the fall. Our retention numbers are dramatically higher than in previous years, and follow up surveys attribute this increase to the prospect of a face-to-face opening in the fall. In past years, our university president claimed that the financial windfall provided by generic, template-driven online instruction was going to save us. Now, he says the opposite: the key to our success and survival is contextualized shared space. Our salvation lies not in mechanization but rather in humanization.

It is my optimistic prediction for the future of education that we will once again recognize the importance of limits. We will not equate scalability with desirability, nor will we conflate dis-location with freedom. I predict that we will reclaim location as a necessary part of education.

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