

Space Invaders and Pedagogical Innovators: Regional Educational Understandings from Australian Occupational Travelers

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Australian occupational Travelers such as circus and fairground people often enter territories normally occupied by permanent residents. This article examines the ways in which these Travelers act as "space invaders," disrupting the boundaries between urban and rural, and as pedagogical innovators, when they develop pioneering approaches to their education. The findings indicate the efficacy of the concepts of multidimensionality, fluidity, and instability in analyzing and understanding the dynamics that occur between the occupational Travelers and permanent residents. The findings also demonstrate possibilities for educational provision that have been achieved for the children of one group of Australian occupational Travelers.

Two themes are being pursued in the diverse articles that constitute this special issue of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*. The first of these is the disruption of the urban-rural binary and a contestation of its utility as an explanatory framework for understanding issues in contemporary rural education research, whether in Australia or in other countries. The second of these is the insistence that not only do urban centers *not* possess a monopoly on educational innovations but also such innovations can sometimes occur *only* in geographically marginal areas.

This article takes up these two themes in relation to groups of people often considered invisible to/by educational researchers and mainstream communities alike. These groups are occupational Travelers: those whose employment requires them to be mobile on a regular basis. In the United States, these people include migrant agricultural workers (Flores, 1996) and carnival workers; in Australia, they include circus and fairground people, whose educational experiences our colleagues and we have researched since 1992 (see for example Danaher, 1998, 2001; Danaher & Danaher, 2000; Moriarty, 2000).

We have interrogated the associations and dissonances between Australian occupational Travelers and rural communities in previous publications. In an article entitled "Showing the way," Danaher (1997) argued that Australian fairground people invoke discourses of their similarities to, as well as their differences from, rural Australians as a means of subverting strategies of marginalization: in their

case, on account of their mobility; in the case of rural people, as a result of their rurality. Danaher, Hallinan, and Moriarty (1999) focused on a similarly positive self-consciousness among Australian circus people as a framework for suggesting ways to reinvigorate Australian rural education, based on a two-fold celebration of the difference of rurality and a justification of rural Australians' calls for equitable access to educational services. Most recently, Danaher, Moriarty, and Hallinan (2001) drew on elements of actor-network theory to highlight the political constructedness of policy categories associated with regional youth, illustrated through the formal and informal learning of Australian circus people.

In this article we deploy different theoretical resources to support a different argument. Underpinning this approach is the recognition that concepts such as urban and rural are not opposite sides of a coin, nor necessarily discrete, nor even located at different ends of the same continuum. Their relationship is much more complex and, while this understanding could be argued from a range of perspectives, it is borne out in the discussions of the three key processes that are the focus of this article. These processes are:

- examining triangular space, ternary relations (Mant, 1999), and Thirdspace (Soja, 1996) as potential navigational aids in mapping new relations between power and educational provision;
- conceptualizing Australian occupational Travelers as what we call space invaders who routinely disrupt the boundaries between urban and rural; and

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- understanding how their status as space invaders enables the Travelers to be pedagogical innovators.

Concepts for New Maps of Space, Power, and Education

We begin by drawing on three different concepts—triangular space, ternary relations, and Thirdspace—that separately and together help us to characterize Australian occupational Travelers as space invaders. These three concepts challenge the bi-polarity of the urban-rural binary and replace it with an understanding of space as multidimensional, fluid, and unstable. It is those features that the Travelers exploit to make claims for themselves and their livelihood.

Triangular space. Conceptualizing where occupational Travelers are positioned in terms of their urban/rural status is important in understanding how they see themselves and how others perceive them. It also helps in understanding their points of view, their needs, and how they relate to others. We reject not only the urban-rural binary but also a conception that places urban and rural on a continuum, with occupational Travelers placed somewhere along that continuum, perhaps moving according to their situation at a particular time. Instead, our analysis of data supports the idea that occupational Traveler status is another dimension that is not simply part urban and part rural. In this conception, the three points become a triangle, with notions of a binary relationship or a single continuum being rejected because they cannot explain the richness of the multidimensionality.

This conception of occupational Traveler status is analogous to an understanding of research into learning environments in which cooperation and competition have often been compared in older literature (for example, Deutsch, 1949). The binary divide conception of learning environments was resolved a long time ago and has not been an issue since it was realized that the binary divide or even a single continuum could not account for a third element: individualistic learning environments. Even though recent literature has focused more on cooperation (following the meta-analysis by Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, and Skon [1981], and the subsequent debates; see also, Moriarty & Gray, 2003), the idea that learning environments are at least three-dimensional in this conception has not been in question. We predict a similar conception of occupational Traveler status; such a status is not simply a combination of urban and rural or a place on a continuum between the two, but is something different altogether. Our discussions with circus and fairground people in Australia when researching the education of occupational Travelers support this analysis and will form part of our argument later in this article where we refer again to triangular space.

Ternary relations. As we have outlined in earlier papers (Coombes, Simpson, Danaher, & Danaher, 2001; Danaher,

Coombes, Danaher, & Anteliz, 2002), Alistair Mant (1999) employed the terms binary and ternary to develop his hypothesis of intelligent leadership, and these terms can be appropriated to make sense of educational experiences. Binary is characterized by interpersonal influence and usually results in a win/lose situation—for example, students living in rural Australia always lose out in terms of resource provision and educational opportunity when compared with their urban counterparts. Ternary was coined by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson and describes three-cornered relationships. Here the winner, the one who comes out on top, will be the product, purpose, ideal, or outcome, rather than the protagonist or antagonist. Thus in a ternary situation educational policymakers and providers located in a centralized, urban context and teachers and students located in rural locations are able to work off one another in such a way that productive learning will become a common goal.

The significance of Mant's (1999) distinction between binary and ternary interactions is that it provides us with a conceptual means of moving beyond the binary oppositions that have contributed to configuring rural educational experiences in deficit terms, viewing teachers and students in these areas as relatively disempowered in relation to the dominant values imposed from an educational governance located in metropolitan areas. For example, the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, which was established for mobile fairground children in 2000, is located in Brisbane, metropolitan center and capital of the state of Queensland. At first glance, this might suggest that the needs of Travelers are being addressed with dedicated sites established in urban areas that do not accommodate the mobile lifestyle of their clients. The significant point, however, is that teachers from this school travel out to engage with the fairground children at diverse locations as they move around the country. In other words, the school itself takes on a mobile quality in order to engage with its student base.

Such mobility and fluidity serve to disrupt the urban-rural binary opposition. This is the crucial implication of ternary interactions: the prospective disruption of the binary between the center and the other. Such a disruption is, of course, far from easy, but it is more likely to occur if the broader structural conditions underpinning the construction of otherness are acknowledged and contested. Recognizing the structural role of discursive categories and flows of educational policy, governance, and provision is a significant part of this process.

Thirdspace. The postmodernist geographer Edward Soja (1996) introduced the concept of Thirdspace, which is the third in this set of three conceptualizations of space on which we draw for the data analysis in the remainder of the article. While Soja's discussion was complex and dense, his most succinct definition of Thirdspace was as follows:

Thirdspace . . . can be described as a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the ‘real’ material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through “imagined” representations of spatiality. (p. 6; emphasis in original)

In other words, Firstspace is material space; Secondspace is mental space; and Thirdspace “draws upon,” yet also “extends well beyond,” the two other spaces (p. 11)

Pursuing the antireductionism and antidualism of Thirdspace, and with clear resonances with both triangular space and ternary relations, Soja cited approvingly his intellectual hero Henri Lefebvre’s rejection of binaries (to whose list below we would add the urban-rural binary identified earlier, and whose aversion to a continuum links with our previous discussion of triangular space):

For Lefebvre, reductionism in all its forms . . . begins with the lure of binarism, the compacting of meaning into a closed either/or opposition between two terms, concepts, or elements. Whenever faced with such binarized categories (subject-object, mental-material, natural-social, bourgeois-proletariat, local-global, center-periphery, agency-structure), Lefebvre persistently sought to crack them open by introducing an-Other term, a third possibility or “moment” that partakes of the original pairing but is not just a simple combination or an ‘in between’ position along some all-inclusive continuum. This critical thirding-as-Othering is the first and most important step in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also . . . (p. 60)

What interests us about the complex ideas contained in Soja’s work on Thirdspace is, appropriately, threefold. Firstly, we use that work to endorse the argument that any account of contemporary rural education research needs to attend to *both* the materiality and the mentality of living and learning in rural locations. Secondly, we concur that binaries, whether between urban and rural or between materiality and mentality, are less constructive than syntheses whose cumulative effect is more significant than the sum of the parts (as is seen in the transformation from either/or to both/and conceptions). Thirdly, we take heart from Soja’s insistence that the most significant implication of Thirdspace is its capacity to assist in imagining otherwise—and in particular in imagining how social (and educational) relations can be less dominating and oppressive for particular groups and relations than they are at present.

So how are these three conceptual resources—triangular space, ternary relations, and Thirdspace—significant for this discussion of Australian occupational Travelers as both space

invaders and pedagogical innovators? While not denying the significance of place in rural education (see, for example, Wotherspoon, 1998), and while not wishing to set up yet another binary between place and space, we are concerned in this article with what Edwards and Usher (2001) have called “[t]he reconfiguration and valorisation of space” (p. 259), based on a foregrounding of “the importance of the local, anchored in the specificity of particular place yet at the same time understandable only in a hybrid way as enfolded in globalising processes” (p. 259).

We seek, therefore, to deploy triangular space, ternary relations, and Thirdspace as navigational aids as we map the complex ways in which Australian occupational Travelers engage with the multidimensionality, fluidity, and instability of space to create new “workings and positionings of power” (Edwards & Usher, 2001, p. 260) that result in innovative and potentially transformative approaches to educational provision. We turn now to portray the Travelers as confident and practiced space invaders.

Australian Occupational Travelers As Space Invaders

Despite the considerable diversity among Australian occupational Travelers (see for example Danaher, 1999), they have in common the fact that they regularly travel through space, and between places, in order to earn their livelihood. For the traditional circus people, this means relatively short-term itineraries planned in competition with the other circuses, with considerable flexibility about how long they will stay in one place and where the next place will be. For the fairground people, their travels follow an annual pattern and are regulated by the Showmen’s Guild of Australasia, working in close consultation with local show societies. For both groups, their road maps are composed of both the materiality and the mentality—matching respectively Soja’s (1996) Firstspace and Secondspace—of journeys through space from one place to another.

It is the mentality of this mobility that justifies our claim that Australian occupational Travelers are space invaders. That is, the spaces through which they travel, and the places in between where they stay for varying lengths of time, are neither natural nor neutral but are in fact socially and politically constructed. This is attested to in the enduring ambivalence that Travelers evoke in townspeople. John Steinbeck (1936) encapsulated this ambivalence brilliantly in his observation on Californian migrant farm workers: “The migrants are needed, and they are hated” (p. 20).

This same ambivalence was elaborated by Broome with Jackomos (1998): “showpeople were viewed by the rest of society with both fear and wonder, and as outcasts” (p. viii); “The initial ambivalence towards sideshows reflected the mixed feelings many had about showpeople themselves. Because they travelled from place to place and were not a settled people, they were distrusted” (p. 28); and

“Showpeople represented potential disorder. Like wanderers everywhere, they were perceived to be beyond the moral and social controls of the local community, or at least a threat to that control” (p. 29). McVeigh (1997) analyzed these kinds of feelings as sedentarism, which he called “the roots of anti-nomadism” (p. 7), or “that system of ideas and practices which serves to normalise and reproduce sedentary modes of existence and pathologise and repress nomadic modes of existence” (p. 9).

So Australian occupational Travelers are space invaders: they are allowed to travel through space, and between places, on sufferance, because they provide entertainment and they contribute to the local economy. This conception of Travelers as space invaders once again highlights the points that we made earlier about space: that it is multidimensional, fluid, and unstable. Its multidimensionality is seen in the complexity and multiplicity of discourses attending the Travelers. Its fluidity is demonstrated by the fact that it is routinely traversed by these people from another place (or from no place). Its mobility is witnessed in the implications of that same fluidity: that assumptions of places being separated by fixed space are inaccurate, and furthermore that the supposedly permanent urban-rural binary is in fact as much socially and politically constructed as the Travelers’ own itineraries, and hence is as subject to contestation and disruption as those itineraries.

Australian Occupational Travelers As Pedagogical Innovators

The fact that Australian occupational Travelers are space invaders creates both the necessity and the opportunity for them also to function as pedagogical innovators. In relation to necessity, one crucial dimension of the sedentarism or antinomadism identified by McVeigh (1997) is formal education. The rise of mass schooling associated with the industrial revolution was predicated on face-to-face instruction to learners located permanently in the same physical location. Learners who depart from this norm are thus classified as both deficient and deviant (see for example, Edwards, 2003)—not a propitious combination of characteristics in terms of socially just educational provision. Even the development of distance education (such as through the Australian Schools of the Air referred to by Moriarty, Danaher, and Danaher, 2003) has been based on an assumption that learners and teachers remain in their respective locations for extended periods, even if they are physically separated from one another.

The consequences of this nonmobile approach to provision for the formal education of occupational Travelers are both stark and dire. These consequences can be illustrated by reference to the previous educational marginalization of Australian fairground people (Danaher, 1998, 2001); we suspect that other groups of Travelers have similar stories to

tell. For the fairground people, until 1989 their options for their children’s education were restricted to the following six possibilities:

- sending their children to local schools along the fairground circuits;
- sending their children to boarding schools;
- teaching their children correspondence lessons on the fairground circuits;
- coming off the fairground circuits and finding alternative employment while their children attended local schools;
- sending their children to live with relatives and attend local schools;
- not involving their children in any formal schooling. (Danaher, 2001, p. 255)

The possibilities entailed in these options, and the choices of options, varied considerably from family to family, reflecting in part the considerable diversity of cultural and financial capital on the fairground circuits. Central to these options, however, was the reality that fairground people were forced to choose between keeping their children with them on the circuits and giving them what the parents considered the best possible education. This very limited choice—or more accurately the absence of any real choice at all—constituted the necessity for fairground people to become pedagogical innovators.

That process of pedagogical innovation was manifested in 1989, when the fairground people’s active lobbying resulted in a specialized program being made available for their children through the Brisbane School of Distance Education (Danaher, 1998). A number of teachers, assigned exclusively to the program, traveled with the fairground people to several places along their circuits, and spent the rest of the time in Brisbane supervising the children’s completion of their distance education papers. Instead of the children having to disrupt their families’ livelihood to attend a school, the school traveled to and with them and provided face-to-face instruction on the circuits.

In 2000, as was indicated above in the discussion of ternary relations, the Queensland School for Traveling Show Children was established, again in direct response to the fairground people’s lobbying for what they saw as the next logical step in educational provision for their children (Danaher, 2001). They wished, in fact, to have their own specialized educational bureaucracy and infrastructure, rather than to be added on to an existing institution. While there are continuing debates about the benefits and drawbacks of such

specialized provision, it is clear that the fairground people have proved themselves adept as pedagogical innovators if that term is understood to mean the creators of new ways of teaching and learning that are more appropriate and relevant to the needs and backgrounds of particular groups of learners. Moreover, from the perspective of the three concepts outlined earlier, the establishment of their own school recognizes the fairground people as a separate point of triangular space, demonstrates the benefits of ternary relations between them and educational providers, and constitutes one form of Thirdspace's insistence on imagining otherwise.

We should emphasize at this point that the Australian fairground people's experience of transforming their social and educational marginalization into this kind of pedagogical innovation is the exception rather than the norm. By contrast, the circus people, the other group of occupational Travelers with whom we have conducted research, are still faced with largely the same few options for educating their children as the fairground people used to have. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that the circus people are pedagogical innovators in other ways, such as their effective teaching of traditional and new skills to inexperienced circus performers and their determined approach to using public education methods to counter the protests of animal liberationists (Danaher & Danaher, 1999; Danaher, Hallinan, & Moriarty, 1999; Moriarty, 2000).

Our argument, therefore, is that the status of Australian occupational Travelers as space invaders provides both the impetus and the strategies for their roles as pedagogical innovators. In particular, the Travelers have demonstrated their skill at appropriating and deploying for their own advantage the multidimensionality, fluidity, and instability identified earlier of the space through which they travel. They have done this by identifying and seizing opportunities for circulating counternarratives that contest the traditional stereotypes about their lives. In the process, they have created new maps for their own and others' spatial, political, and educational journeys.

Conclusion

What are the implications of this discussion of Australian occupational Travelers as both space invaders and pedagogical innovators for contemporary rural education research? Those implications—which are three in number—have been usefully synthesized by Edwards and Usher (2001):

Here pedagogic spaces suggest a learning that is not simply mediated through a teacher but also through others such as learners hitherto marginalised. Such an approach foregrounds the spatial nature of learning, and the blurring of boundaries.

Furthermore, the pedagogic spaces of the educational institution cannot any longer be isolated from those of the home, the street and the workplace. Each encompasses a range of pedagogies through which people learn to be and become in specific ways. (p. 267)

First, the reference to “the spatial nature of learning, and the blurring of boundaries” articulates with our emphasis on space as multidimensional, fluid, and unstable, as well as with our discussion in the first section of this article of a rejection of the urban-rural binary, based on an either/or relationship, in favor of a focus on a both/and approach. This accords with a common theme in many articles in this journal: that rural residents are *not* to be defined as other than urban residents, and that they have their own attributes, aspirations, and capacities to create their own meanings.

Second, Edwards and Usher's (2001) citation of “learners hitherto marginalised” can be extended to the observation that some learners are more marginalized than others. That is, a rejection of the urban-rural binary should not blind us to the endurance and resilience of inequities on both material and mental planes (Soja, 1996). In other words, a determination to celebrate rural education for all its possibilities and potentials must be juxtaposed with an awareness that educational gains are often tentative and temporary and need to be guarded and preserved.

Third, Edwards and Usher's (2001) identification of “a range of pedagogies through which people learn to be and become in specific ways” (p. 267) reminds us of a crucial lesson that applies equally to rural residents and occupational Travelers. This is that formal education is but one dimension of lived experience, and that it should be set beside, and valued with, other elements of social life. A related point is that formal education itself has much to learn from the informal domain of lifelong learning, whereby other forms and means of fulfillment and meaning making come into their own.

We close by reiterating our conviction that the concepts outlined earlier—triangular space, ternary relations, and Thirdspace—and the characterization of Australian occupational Travelers as both space invaders and pedagogical innovators that those concepts helped us to elaborate also articulate with the two dominant themes being explored in this journal issue. In relation to disrupting the urban-rural binary, both concepts and Travelers have highlighted the constructedness and vulnerability of that binary. With regard to educational innovations occurring in geographically marginal areas, one crucial dimension of the Travelers' space invasions is that they bring with them ways of seeing differently, and of imagining otherwise, about educational provision. Their maps contain navigational aids from which nonmobile groups could learn a great deal.

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