

# **Spatial imaginaries and the student learning journey in higher education: Transition as a contested space**

Dr Karen Noble, Dr Robyn Henderson  
University of Southern Queensland

[noblek@usq.edu.au](mailto:noblek@usq.edu.au)

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the notion of spatial imaginaries as a means of understanding, interpreting and challenging unspoken norms of university life, through an investigation of the transition experiences of self-identified ‘at-risk’ students in a regional university in Australia. Taking an actor-orientated perspective, the authors’ focus is an examination of students’ subjective motivations in forming a collective movement. It is argued that the Learning Circle approach adopted in a first year experience support program contributed to wider social changes for the participants and significantly impacted on their discourse and practice of university life. The human geography notion of spatial imaginaries is seen as a means by which tertiary educators can gain a better understanding of how to scaffold students’ learning journeys and how to support students in their construction of a ‘sense of place’, while at the same time affording students an opportunity to explore their engagement and sense of connectedness in what for many is initially a contested space.

## **Introduction**

Entry into university has traditionally been associated with special expectations and excitement, as well as with varying degrees of tension and anxiety. In the higher education context in Australia, and indeed globally, there is increased interest in the first year university experience with regard to addressing the high retention and attrition rates of this critical time in the student learning journey (Ellis, 2002; Falk & Balatti, 1999; Hayden & Long, 2006; Krause, 2006). Furthermore, across the higher education sector, academics are confronted by

economic rationalist demands that costs be cut and staff-student ratios increased (Ramsden, 1992).

Traditionally, technical-rational models have guided much curriculum development and delivery in higher education and, in recent times, such approaches have been increasingly scrutinised in terms of their inability to adequately prepare students for the challenging social contexts in which their work is to be undertaken. There is now widespread recognition of a need to focus on social as well as academic preparedness in the development of programs designed to support students in their transition to university (Hayden & Long, 2006; Krause, 2006; Noble & Henderson, 2008). While the multiple perspectives dealing with transition and retention issues highlight the diversity of views and experiences, there are many common themes and issues, including academic preparedness, financial support and social support. The focus in this paper is particularly on the latter issue of social support and the development of cohesive social support networks that empower each individual and are fluid and sustainable beyond students' initial transition into university.

At a regional Australian university, a Learning Circle approach was facilitated, with groups of between 5 and 15 first year, self-identified 'at-risk' education students meeting regularly with academic staff (the authors) to discuss and critically reflect upon social issues that they regarded as important. These Learning Circles took place within a designated teaching space. Over time, the students indicated that "the closed door" of the teaching space was of considerable importance to their perceptions of safety within the university. Additionally, the students likened themselves to "squatters" occupying an unoccupied space within the university, even though the physical space was a busy teaching room for most of the time. Hence, the spatial imaginaries that frame this paper – *Closing the door to the outside world: A notion of squatting within the university* – are understood as being multidimensional images and ideas that provided insights into the students' perceptions of their transition into university.

Drawing on key concepts from the human geography literature, this paper is focused on exploring how the participation of this particular cohort of first year university students in weekly Learning Circle meetings assisted them in their transition to university and led to the development of a 'sense of place' (Gruenewald, 2003; Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). The students used imagery to illustrate how such an approach assisted them to understand their transition in terms of the enactment of power relations and how, over time, this space came to

symbolise them as a group of learners. Specifically, the use of research conversations explored the various ways in which the students worked to negotiate meaning and practice within a university space, to reconcile their images of themselves as successful lifelong learners, and to realise a sense of place that is multidimensional in nature.

As explained earlier, the Learning Circle meetings were set up as a process for providing social support for self-identified “at-risk” students in their transition into the first year of university study. Initially, there had been no consideration of the possibility of researching the process. However, early feedback from the students about the success of the Learning Circle prompted an application for ethical clearance and the involvement of the students in a research project. The students were comfortable with the digital recording of Learning Circle meetings and the data presented in this paper have been drawn from those recordings. The recordings provided a jointly constructed ‘student narrative’ about the enablement and constraint of their first-year learning journey.

### **Employment of spatial imaginaries in establishing social networks and relationships**

In human geography, imaginative geographies and geographical imaginations are not new ideas, but rather are steeped in the work of Wright and Lowenthal in the 1960s (Cox, 1999). Geographical imaginaries, as “distinct ways of imagining space relations and difference” (Cox, 1999, p.2), have widespread application in terms of effectively conveying influential ideas or mental maps to describe the variation that occurs amongst ways of seeing and understanding concrete and abstract notions of life experiences. While spatial imaginaries have an obvious application in description of the physical and tangible aspects of life experience, it is imperative that such imaginaries are understood to also convey reflections of power, either overt or covert, and a sense of place. Thus, the aim of this approach is to formulate a richer understanding about the personal moments that are important and indispensable elements of the lived experiences of university transition.

In this sense, then, space is understood as socially produced, with the interconnectedness of the students with notions of space and place establishing a spatial dialectic (Lehtovuori, 2005). This means that the geographical imaginaries of *Closing the door to the outside world: A notion of squatting within the University*, developed by the students in the Learning Circle, needs to be understood as multidimensional, The students were not only describing

their transition to university and how it was understood and perceived to be at particular points in time, but they were constructing a space and place where they could find ways of changing their experiences, thus enabled them to see themselves as successful within the university context. From the earliest Learning Circle meetings, the students began to talk about the calming effect of the space (the room in which the group met) and their ongoing need to be able to come together for support and to escape the complexities of university. It was apparent from the outset that an exploration by way of spatial imaginaries would prove a useful means of teasing out the multiplicity and depth of perceived benefit of this social support structure, as well as the ways in which these students were negotiating the multiple aspects of their lived university experiences.

### **An actor-orientated approach**

Taking an actor-orientated approach to explicating meaning from the spatial imaginaries of these first year students, the focus becomes one of understanding their subjective motivations of forming and contributing to the collective movement of personal and professional support at university. As previously mentioned, it is important to implement methods that allow for “alternative” understandings of particular truths to be explored over time as such processes make available a better understanding of how theory relates to practice and how present ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1980) constrain and enable individuals. Through such a process comes a privileging of the personal and emotional components of transition, where individual meaning-making is seen as critical to exploring one’s identity.

The Learning Circle approach uses the notion of a community of practice, whereby academics join together to enhance critically reflective skills, incorporate tacit knowledge and engage in dialogue to enhance their teaching (Wenger, 1998). The idea of developing such a process was underpinned by the belief that the Learning Circle approach would enhance student engagement by creating a space where individual identities would interact with students’ developing ‘educational’ identities. For students, the ‘space’ offered opportunities to increase their understanding of the discourses that were shaping that space and impacting upon learning experiences.

Drawing on Gee’s (1996) notion of Discourses as “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing” (p. viii), it is argued that the

rapidly changing higher education context creates a “new” Discourse – the Discourse of “university student” – but often without explicit knowledge of what that now means or of what it might entail. Issues of identity and relationships with the institution or authority are generally not considered in an explicit way (Henderson & Hirst, 2007; Lea & Street, 1998). As Gee (1996) explains, Discourses involve a “usually taken for granted and tacit ‘theory’ of what counts as a ‘normal’ person and the ‘right’ ways to think, feel, and behave” (p. ix). Additionally, Discourses “do not always represent consistent and compatible values” and the taking on of a new Discourse can be a difficult and stressful process (p. ix). In using the Learning Circle approach, all students are afforded opportunities to critically reflect on their experiences and on their ways of “doing”, “being” and “knowing” within the university context as a pedagogical place in their lives.

### **Unpacking the imaginary in the Learning Circle through the dimensions of place and space**

To appreciate ‘place’ as a construct that informs understanding of the student learning journey and students’ sense of space within the university context, both ‘place’ and ‘space’ are understood to be multidisciplinary concepts. Gruenewald (2003) draws attention to the application of geographical theory of place and space to thinking philosophically about education. He cites Geertz (1996) to comment that “no one lives in the world in general” (Gruenewald, 2003, p.621) and that a multidisciplinary examination reveals that

places are profoundly pedagogical...[and] places *teach* us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further places *make* us: as occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped (Gruenewald, 2003, p.621).

Drawing on the five dimensions of place identified by Gruenewald (2003) – perceptual, sociological, ideological, political and the ecological – an exploration of the pedagogy and relevance of the Learning Circle upon the lived experiences of students becomes possible in tangible ways. Here the dimensions of place are used to explore student narratives, illustrating the foundations of place and space that developed for them. Such an investigation has enabled the researchers to relate the kind of achievements that really matter to individual students in ways that are not always quantifiable or statistically comparable. It is these

achievements that often go unrecognised as they fall outside of the boundaries of measuring academic success. By applying Gruenewald's (2003) framework, the dimensions of place can be depicted in terms of subject-object relationships, thereby privileging the students' emotional responses to their experiences. Each of the five dimensions are applied to the students' narrative, and excerpts (in italics) have been used to illustrate the interconnections between them, at the same time highlighting the depth of understanding that this group of students developed through the process of reflection on their student learning journey.

### **Perceptual dimension of place**

Within the perceptual dimension of place, the central focus was the students' perceived understanding of their transition to university. While the physical environment of the university may appear to be inanimate and simply exist as a place to be inhabited at particular times, it became evident that the ways in which these students reacted and responded to their participation in the context were important. In this way, attention is drawn to the cultural and ecological connectedness of places to one another. Due to the individual nature of experience, communication and participation in the social world are framed by prior understandings of experience. This means that the ways in which students are able to effectively assimilate their transition to university with other aspects of their lived experience are important. The following excerpt from the student narrative illustrates this point:

*I think that each one of us values one another. Well, it has certainly felt like that for me. I now think that I have knowledge that is worth sharing and that I don't just have to follow what someone else has done ... You get to look at your strengths and the small steps that you are taking are a focus ... that is a really important thing, that is empowerment just in itself. When we talk about our stuff and we listen to others talking about their own issues, you come to realise that you are not alone and that, even though you think you are lost, you can actually do something so small like suggest meeting somewhere just to walk in together – it is the little things that we can all do that can make a difference to how someone feels about coming back time and time again and getting to feel comfortable here at uni. Well, that's how it is for me: it's always easier to get used to difficult situations if you feel as though you have support and you're not on your own. Mind you, I have always had a friend to do things with before. It has been scary being here on my own and having to start from*

*scratch. It felt really bad in the beginning, but now you don't really even think about it, you just know it will be okay and that the group is here to support you however you need ... I guess now it just feels like you are more a part of it ... you feel as though in a sense, you belong here and have earned the right to be here.*

Here, the student's focus is on developing a strong social network within the university context. While skills of friendship are transferable from other contexts, the student highlights the ways in which such strategies are able to assist her to deal with the emotional response to the unfamiliar context of university. 'Transition', therefore, is not necessarily seen as a place or a space in time, but rather, as a fluid movement towards "knowing" and "being" a university student, with initial survival seen as a 'rite of passage'. The student's perception of the university context shaped and formed the ways in which participation and communication with others was able to occur. As this student explained, the focus on what the students 'know' and their perceived feelings and attitudes towards adjustment to their new environment helped to heighten their awareness of how to deal with spatial aspects of their university experience.

### **Sociological dimension of place**

The sociological dimension of the student learning journey evokes the person-place relationship, or what Heaney (1980, cited in Gruenewald, 2003) describes as "the marriage between the geography of mind and geographical places" (p.626). From this perspective, it is interesting to view the ways in which the students constructed the physical space in terms of 'a sanctuary' or 'a place to escape' within the geographical space of the university. For the students, closing the door of the teaching space was a symbolic gesture that enabled them, as a group, to create a physical space within which they could explore the complexities of the geographical mind space that their transition to university involved. So while the physical space of the classroom did not change in any way, the informal arrangement of the Learning Circle was seen as significant:

*Being able to come here and know that this space is ours for two hours, that it is just us and (academic staff) coming together to see how we are all going, to take care of each other and to check up on how we are all going along I know that each week when we open the door again and go back out to the 'uni world' that it is only a week*

*at a time – in the beginning just getting through a week at a time was a challenge. It's different now and I look for other things, but the sense of security of having this space is still really important to me.*

Through reflection upon the beginning of the student learning journey, the students were able to describe their perceptions of the effects that the Learning Circle had on their sense of place within the university and the way in which this space was socially constructed. The Learning Circle was understood to 'be' what they made it to be. It was more than a place. It was an acknowledgement of involvement, of engagement as well as interdependence. There was an acceptance that, despite community being a social concept, it was utterly dependent on the individuals involved. It was not sameness, but interlocking diversity and respect for individual difference. Its unity was that of a diversity in which an arena of action was created. Therefore, this learning community of practice was never static, always negotiated, shifting and adjusting its "principles of order, but always mine and ours, mine to belong to, ours to be ourselves" (O'Farrell, 1999, p.18).

Participation at university as a full time on campus student required some major adjustments for these students and it was necessary for them to often reconcile this choice within the Learning Circle. Indeed on many occasions, the students (and the academics) supported one another to find solutions to life problems that further complicated their journeys as students. For some, there were issues of homelessness, financial difficulties, needs of young children and other family commitments. Through a process of critical reflection, the students found ways together to solve many such issues. Often their solutions were arrived at collectively and, as a group, they celebrated one another's achievement in this regard. The Learning Circle was a socially constructed space that was fluid and changing to reflect the nature of the journeys of the individuals.

### **Ideological dimension of place**

We now shift to an examination of the ways in which spaces and places are seen as being expressions of relationships of power within the ideological dimension. From this perspective, the Learning Circle is analysed in terms of its social formation. The concern here is the ways in which the space "reflects and reproduces social relationships of power" (Gruenewald, 2003, p.628). The students' conception of the Learning Circle in terms of the

power dynamic challenged their pre-existing understanding of the student-academic relationship and this in turn, had a profound effect on the ways in which the space evolved over time.

The students highlighted the early introduction to the academic staff involved in this initiative as being very helpful. They commented on the impact of having a supportive environment within the university context, a place where they felt that they could escape from the perceived pressures of university life and where they could engage in a constructive, critically reflective process each week. Through the co-construction of narrative and metaphor, the students as a collective referred regularly to the door of the room that was the regular weekly meeting place. Shutting the door to begin the session was symbolic to all:

*When we shut the door, it was like we got to shut out everything that was going on and we had time just to be and to think through solutions to each others' problems. It felt good to know that we came to care about one another and that we could actually help each other. Really, sometimes if it wasn't for our Wednesday meeting, I don't think I would have made it through the week. Sometimes it was knowing that (names of the academic staff) were putting the time aside to help us out and we didn't want to let them down ... each time we finished on a Wednesday and we all had to go back to the outside world at uni I felt really calm, no matter how stressed I felt before I walked in. I still feel like that now.*

The creation of the constant physical environment enabled the construction of close friendships and the perceived balancing of power relationships. In fact, attending this group was the first contact for each of the students with each other. They had now previously known each other. However, from these early encounters, social networks have developed whereby students rely on one another and also count on the academics involved for ongoing social and academic support.

*I make sure that no matter what else is happening, I am always here on a Wednesday. Sometimes it is the only sane time that I have. (Names of the academics) are always so happy to see us and they seem to really care about how we are going. Our group has really become a bit like a big family. We all listen and we all share and help each other out. No-one is really in control and we just all help each other out. (Names of the academics) made sure we all got our turn in the beginning; that we were all*

*included, but we do that for ourselves now. We organise ourselves if they (academics) are running late; we just get started and everyone joins in as they arrive. It's great, I don't know what I would do without them all now.*

The students valued social integration and support. Although they regarded academic adjustment and integration as important, academic issues took a secondary position to social integration and support. By creating a specific time and place for students to meet informally, the students became independent and at the same time interdependent. It was evident that the social relationships of power had shifted, with the place and space of the Learning Circle enabling both individual and collective responsibility.

### **Political dimension of place**

This inquiry has invited students to engage with academic staff in a first hand experience of adjustment to university life. In a political sense, such involvement can be understood as “a process of understanding and shaping what happens there” (Gruenewald, 2003, p.620). The focus of this dimension of place highlights the student learning journey in terms of “struggle and resistance” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 631). The Learning Circle, along with all that it has come to symbolise for the students, enabled them to understand their sense of agency and it provided them with opportunities to reimagine and reshape their identities as university students (Noble & Henderson, 2008). As one of the students explained:

*Being a part of this research has been a great experience. It has given me insight into the kind of stuff that academics do, that it isn't just about standing up there and talking to us about stuff, but really making a difference and saying how things can be done differently ... (names of the academics) inviting us to be a part of a project, not just giving information, but designing it and being a part of the whole thing ... That (names of the academics) are actually interested in what I think is also remarkable ... it is good to know that we aren't just numbers on a page, that we matter and that the things we say can help to make it easier or better for others ... Although I still want to be a teacher more than anything, already I can see that research can be exciting too, I hope that I get to do more of this stuff before I leave uni – it makes you think differently ... to be more aware of yourself as well as aware of the way that others think about the same things.*

By privileging all participants, the Learning Circle helped to create space where the students were able to become agents of their university learning journeys. Unless new university students can feel that they belong to the learning community of the university, then their chances of being successful students are likely to be diminished (Noble & Henderson, 2008; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001).

Our analysis of the data we collected indicated that there were a couple of critical steps as the students 'became' university students. Initially, the 'shut door' metaphor, which they used to describe the calm they felt inside the meeting room, was their way of dealing with the disjuncture and discomfort that they felt between their lives inside and outside university. In fact, the students' talk about the room and about having to go '*back to the outside world at uni*' indicated that they felt like '*outsiders*'. As Gee (1996) argues, becoming an 'insider' of a particular Discourse requires the 'right' combination – 'putting words, deeds, values, other people, and things together in integral combinations for specific times and places' (p. viii). Over time, the students were able to achieve the 'saying-doing combination' (p. viii) without the angst that they had felt initially.

*Deciding to come to the group and find out what it was going to be about was a big step. I knew I wasn't coping, but to come to this (the Learning Circle meetings) meant that I was letting others know. Surprising though, it was the best thing that I did. It made me realise that there was no shame in not fitting in and there were others in the same boat anyway.*

Highlighted is the fact that, for these students, taking on the Discourse of university student was aided by their membership of the Learning Circle. They came to understand that they had individual rights as well as collective responsibilities; that they had a choice to participate (or not), and that over time they developed a sense of belonging to the group. Through this initiative and the privileging of interactions and relationships, they were able to make connections to the other Discourses that they identified with, thereby re-imaging themselves as successful university students, rather than marginalising themselves as otherwise.

## **Ecological dimension of place**

Rather than thinking globally with regard to student transition to university and implementing a universal program of support, this project instead sought local solutions to specific issues in the contexts relevant to the students. What is foregrounded in the ecological dimension of place is that there is a need to examine socio-ecological relationships and how the university is the experiential centre of patterns of social domination. To understand the student learning journey in this way required an examination of the commitment to the evolution of the Learning Circle. Remarkably, the initiative described here was extremely successful, even though there were no economic resources to support its implementation. Furthermore, the space that was used for the Learning Circle meetings was simply a classroom that happened to be empty at that time of the week, and the students identified themselves as ‘at risk’ and marginalised within the university community.

Over the year, the students flourished in the space *behind the door, where they likened themselves to squatters, occupying a space that was not legitimately theirs*. By the end of their first year at university, it was evident that the students’ involvement in the Learning Circle had enabled them to come to terms with social injustice issues and their perceptions of marginality. Instead, they were able to identify as agentive and skilful students who were developing as successful lifelong learners. In transversing the terrain to ‘becoming university students’, they felt that they had become more equipped to deal with a range of organisational structures and processes, to challenge grand narratives about university experience, and to reframe the context to suit their needs, interests and abilities. No longer did the students keep the university Discourse separate, but they were learning to move within and between their multiple Discourses and identities, even though they ‘need not, and often do not, represent consistent and compatible values’ (Gee, 1996, p. ix). For the students, moving amongst Discourses had become a more seamless process, with an increased potential for a sharing of problem-solving strategies across Discourses.

## **Place-conscious transitioning in higher education and identity construction: The power of the collective**

The informal research conversations of the Learning Circle provided the data for this exploration of the establishment and maintenance of a learning community. By considering

the ‘student narrative’ and its relations to the five elements of Gruenewald’s (2003) framework for applying a geography of place and space to education, we have demonstrated some of the meanings that the students collectively attributed to a developing sense of ‘connectedness’ to the university context. We believe that the Learning Circle approach, used in conjunction with a theorising of place and space, has the potential to broaden understanding of the student learning journey. At the same time, we recognise the potential for the process to trouble and transform one’s philosophy and practice in relation to teaching and learning (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, we identified a spatial dialectic. Whilst the students felt constrained, and in some cases even scared, within the place and space of the university context, their experiences within the Learning Circle – and the space and place ‘behind the door’ of the room where Learning Circle meetings occurred – offered opportunities to problem-solve their experiences and to reshape the place and space that was concerning them. By considering the perceptual, sociological, ideological, political and ecological dimensions of place and space in relation to the data we collected, we have shown how the Learning Circle helped students to foreground strategies that they used in their out-of-university lives and to find ways of using these within the university context. This resulted in the Learning Circle developing as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) with enhanced student outcomes. Indeed, this particular group of students – all of whom had identified themselves as “at-risk” of not being successful within the university context – passed the first year of their education degree and are currently enrolling in second year.

The students discussed how the Learning Circle enabled them to develop a greater degree of agency within the university context. We argue that the development and maintenance of authentic partnerships and relationships are keys to the transformation of university transition programs. In the Learning Circle we have described, the approach enabled the students as well as tertiary education academics to consider the multiple realities that characterise success on the learning journey (Moss, 2003; Wenger, 1998). Whilst this paper has focused on the experiences of the students, it would appear to be important to consider and reflect on the particular contexts and social networks that assist academics to develop, implement and evaluate programs that enable students to develop positive dispositions as lifelong learners. As the data presented in this paper have shown, the students identified the importance of a

positive sense of place and space, and this was evident in both the micro-space of the Learning Circle as well as larger space of the university context.. It is argued, therefore, that there is a need for place-conscious approaches to transition in higher education and that these should privilege social as well as academic support, as smooth and successful transition to university requires attention to several related elements, including student readiness, social support systems and involvement in a program of strengths-based learning contexts.

Additionally, further context specific research requires ongoing analysis of the possibilities for place-conscious approaches to education in an era that is often defined by institutional standards, quality assurance and economic rationalism. Such inquiry creates the possibility of exploring the abstract nature of place in relation to contesting the space of university in the student learning journey. Importantly then, spatial imaginaries are a means of understanding, interpreting and challenging unspoken norms of university life that reach far beyond the matter under immediate examination. In fact, understandings of dimensionality from this study of place and space in a university context can be brought to bear on grander complexities that exist in educational institutions more generally. The focus then is on subjective motivations in forming a collective movement regardless of context.

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