

Emphasising the ‘Everyday’ – Space Construction and Collaborative Learning

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Abstract

The concepts of space constructivism taught in classrooms concentrate on spatial conflicts, and the different viewpoints involved. Everyday structuration of space can be well observed in collaborative mapping. This contribution proposes a combination of collaborative mapping exercises and hands-on learning about constructed spaces.

1 Introduction

In the 1976 animated film *Le doux travail d’Astérix* the two heroes Asterix and Obelix encounter *la maison qui rend fou*, the “house which makes insane”.¹ Of course, it is not the house itself, as a structure in physical-material space, which (or: who?) makes people insane. Neither is it only the bureaucrats, sending visitors from pillar to post. Independently, from whether anybody really lost their minds, the attribution *drives-mad* stems from repeated communication about the place: social space has been structured. It is not the action of the few (or even a genuine attribute of the building), but the communicating, and subsequent believing, of the many, which produces social spaces.

When geographers talk about the production of spaces, more often than not they use spatial conflicts rather than such everyday situations as illustrative examples. J. BRIAN HARLEY, in his legendary article (1989), discusses the fight over definition power over maps’ content which is dominated by motorists and tourism; Cobarrubias and PICKLES (2009) report on social movements discovering space and spatial communication as a means of opposition against established powers. Everyday examples are, for instance, used by TAYLOR (2007), who illustrates his thoughts on Castells’ *spaces of places* and *spaces of flows* with urban economics. A notable theory of space production which explicitly builds upon its everyday nature is Benno WERLENS “Social geography of everyday regionalisation” (e.g. 2007). He extends Giddens’ ideas of social structuration and emphasises the role of communication in space production.

Slowly, constructivists’ theories also reach the classrooms. Since almost two decades, geography educators have shown a strong interest in geoinformation. Recently, collaborative mapping gained increased access to classrooms (cf. e.g. VOGLER et al. 2010); with it, de-constructive practices have been introduced into geography curricula (cf. GRYL 2009, VOGLER 2010); students are taught to deal responsibly with social constructions in maps, and are brought towards “Spatial Citizenship” (JEKEL et al. 2010, GRYL et al. 2010).

¹ I prefer my own translation over the one of the original English synchronisation (“which sends you mad”), as the verb “make” stronger reflects the agency of the spatial entity *building*.

What little is being dealt with, is the *everyday* structuration of social space Werlen had had in mind. While most examples discussed in didactics literature are situated in the immediate (in German) "Lebenswelt" and everyday life of the students, the groups of actors involved usually overtly expose distinct interests. In Werlen's sense, though, rather the casual utterances of you and me are constitutive for spatial structuration. It is the students and their peers, who produce stable social spaces.

JEKEL et al. (2010: 40) discuss appropriation of space using the example of parking areas. Little more than arbitrary paved areas in physical-material space, they are still dominated, attributed, and named by motorists, who by convention and/or by accident currently hold the most definition power over the specific area. As a typical opponent re-definition of space children using the very same area as an improvised playing ground are presented.

The example is intriguing, and manages to get across most of Werlen's conclusions in an easily comprehensible and immediately accessible way. Bringing in de CERTEAU'S (1988) concept of strategic practices naturalising desired meanings, and opposed *tactical practices* to re-define alternative meanings, further enriches the discussion (cf. *ibid.*).

Nonetheless, conflicts about the meaning of space – and that is what the example is about – remain the special case. Society works spatially, only because a plethora of unwritten understandings about spaces and places exists. The nondescript, everyday communicative achievements render social space as we perceive it.

2 Collaborative Mapping and Space Production

In a recent contribution (FINK 2011), I discuss, how in collaborative cartographies the discursive nature of social space construction is especially overt. I describe the different conceptions of "map" and the different understandings of "mapping" which underlie implicit cartographies, before examining, going along SCHLOTTMANN'S elaborations (2005), how mapping results are influenced by the individual *Backgrounds* (cf. SEARLE 1983) reflected in cartographic discourses.

FISCHER (2009: 3), in respect to Neogeography, sees "virtual communities" as "spaces for the cooperative sharing of meaning and the joint production of meaning". He then draws on LAVE & WENGER'S (1991) concept of *communities of practice*, to show how people "consume and interpret spatial visions" (FISCHER 2009:4) of their own community/-ies of practice while communicating about places (for instance during joint mapping practices), and find themselves in multiple communities of practice at the same time.

ELWOOD (2006: 199ff.) reports from challenges in PPGIS projects, which involve the constant need for "negotiat[ing] simultaneously in many aspects of the everyday practices [...] in sometimes contradictory and ambiguous ways". The "experiences and knowledge" of the participants "may be differentiated along lines of race, class, gender and ethnicity", and influence the meanings of produced knowledge.

Certainly, power in mapping processes, while formerly concentrated, has been distributed more equally. More people take part in the respective discourses, and bring with them more opinions and topics. Consequently, mapping becomes more and more an everyday part of

communication about space. This is also reflected by collaborative mapping exercises being established in geography education.

3 Discovering Constructivism Through Collaborative Mapping

Teaching social space constructivism and collaborative learning environments, surprisingly, are seldom employed at the same time, albeit the latter offers great possibilities to colourfully demonstrate the former's mechanisms. Comparing the outcomes of different collaboratively created maps provides for interesting insights. Let us look at an exemplary (imaginary) lesson to put these loose thoughts into practical context:

Say, a collaborative mapping project of the school's neighbourhood was carried out over the last couple of weeks. Groups were overseen to comprise students with similar interests – they usually find themselves anyway. One or more of the mapping tasks involved mapping a distinctly subjective dimension (“great places to hang out”, ...).

Whatever the original emphasis of the collaborative mapping exercise was – a retrospective now can provide interesting insights into mechanisms of space production: The different sub-societies of the student body (“science nerds”, “athletes”, “musical talents”, ...) most likely produced different maps reflecting different *world-views*. The students discover differences between their individual and collective world-views, and – most importantly – can reflect on the decision making processes (“What to put in the map?”) during the group mappings: societal space was structured.

FISCHER (2009: 8) reports from a study on social web communities, which involved groups of (university) students collaboratively mapping their city, that every student tried to emphasise “their personal subjective spatial experience” by “mak[ing] it explicit and deep[ening] it while mapping”, and that while no “formal structures” existed, “they built structures that emerge from cooperation”. It is exactly these structures and communication processes which form the core of everyday space structuration.

4 Discussion

I discussed, that geography education does not sufficiently emphasise the *everyday* nature of spatial constructivism. Rather, most examples focus on specific conflict cases to explain individual views on space, like parking areas. Next, I presented arguments, which examined the production and/or appropriation of space in collaborative mapping efforts. Finally, I assessed the possibilities and obstacles of integrating explicating everyday regionalisation with already adopted collaborative mapping exercises. I drafted a short exemplary implementation into a lesson plan, but still owe a comprehensive review of similar considerations of other authors.

I consider this extended abstract a snapshot of my current thoughts. Unfortunately, geography didactics remains my pet research project. Therefore, I want to share these ideas here. Maybe more involved people find them promising enough to implement my considerations into actual lessons. Integrating collaborative mapping with explaining social production of space seems like an idea worth pursuing further.

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