

Chad Gaffield

Educational History, the Spatial Turn, and Digital Scholarship: Reflections on the concept of educational spaces

At the heart of the discipline of History is a conviction that context matters. But there seems to be less and less agreement on how to define the appropriate context for research. National history is having a particularly hard time these days as researchers focus on the changing flows of ideas and people, processes and products, across official geo-political boundaries. But micro history is similarly in trouble for having distracted researchers from the supposedly important historical questions or for becoming trivial in comparison to Big History (Guldi/Armitage 2014).

At first glance, such developments may appear to complicate rather than clarify metaphysical and epistemological decisions especially for educational historians who have so successfully shown the central importance of mass schooling to the making of modernity. Indeed, such research during the past half-century has played an important role in the re-thinking of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Micro histories compellingly analyzed school attendance patterns in the context of changing family and community life. National histories revealed how governments embraced schools as projects of state formation. Thematic studies showed how education reflected and inspired changing norms, policies and experiences of class, gender and ethnicity. Taken together, such work along with many other contributions moved educational history from the margins to the mainstream of efforts to understand the profound transformations following the Age of Revolutions.

But will educational historians be sidelined once again if they do not embrace “internationality” in posing and pursuing their research questions? In a stimulating and sophisticated way, Sylvia Kesper-Biermann suggests that the “spatial turn” (as it is called elsewhere) offers a way forward that both benefits from past research insights and reconciles the competing criteria of regional, national and internationalist approaches. The proposed concept of “educational spaces” is attractive for its inclusive and coherent ambition. By encouraging researchers to imagine such spaces as following as well as transgressing official boundaries, Sylvia Kesper-Biermann does not privilege certain levels of analysis over others. Rather than arguing in favor or against national or internationalist approaches, for example, she implies that it all depends on the research question under investigation.

At the same time, however, Sylvia Kesper-Biermann insists that “educational spaces” (however delimited) possess two defining characteristics. First, they reflect the historical evidence of “interactions, perceptions, and relationships.” Second, and in the same way, specific educational spaces must be contextualized along with multiple other spaces in order to appreciate the extent of boundary duplication or overlapping as a result of interactions, perceptions and relationships.

Sylvia Kesper-Biermann’s ambition is attractive since there is no doubt that educational historians have repeatedly demonstrated the value of multiple levels of analysis. From commu-

nity research on school attendance to transnational studies of ideas and policies, historians have found multiple ways to interpret formal and informal education across time and place. Nonetheless, each approach has tended to dominate scholarly debate at different times. Micro-history became preferred in the 1970s, for example, as historians focused on the changing behavior of children and families more than the ambitions of leading educators and school promoters. The linguistic turn then brought by the 1980s a new emphasis on education in terms of state projects to construct populations with specific cultural mindsets. The subsequent rise of world history (including perspectives such as the Atlantic World) de-emphasized jurisdictional boundaries whether national, regional or local in favor of intended and unintended flows of ideas and practices. Sylvia Kesper-Biermann notes that these and many other approaches currently characterize research in Germany although projects that assume the national border continue to be most common.

Much of Sylvia Kesper-Biermann's proposal resonates with my own thinking in light of research on the emergence and development of mass schooling in Canada. Focusing on relationships is compelling given the success of those who redefined class and gender in this way beginning in the 1960s. Over the years, I have happily undertaken community, regional and national histories always doing my best to recognize the contingent significance of official borders. In one study, the historical evidence over four decades revealed how a river both linked and divided neighboring communities despite and because of its formal political role (Gaffield et al. 1997). Along the way, debates among parents and school trustees changed substantially as they re-imagined the geographic context of their lives. The concept of "educational spaces" would have worked well in this project especially in problematizing from the outset the various federal, provincial, municipal, and diocesan jurisdictions.

At the same time, I wonder Sylvia Kesper-Biermann's formulation of the concept of educational spaces side-steps the challenge of differentiating (or not) specific contexts within perceived educational spaces. Secondly, this formulation seems to ignore why the "spatial turn" has gained such traction during the past decade and thus misses the real potential of historical interpretation in the Digital Age.

To begin with, the value of conceptualizing educational spaces depends in practical terms on identifying ways to explore how and in what ways "interactions, perceptions, and relations" both reflected and defined specific spaces. One challenge would be to undertake research without assuming any borders. How would researchers focus on a particular idea or behavior or policy or practice without *a priori* deciding upon "where" (however defined)? My own research on language-of-instruction in nineteenth-century schools illustrates this challenge (Gaffield 1987). On the one hand, the development of one-language policies in various jurisdictions did not occur in isolation. Like so many aspects of educational change, precedents elsewhere certainly informed policymakers and legislators. However, study after study shows that local conditions played key roles in the creation and adoption of such policies as well as in their meaning for individuals, households and communities.

In one case, for example, the language controversy gave birth to a new sense of identity, as Ontario's French-Canadians became what would later be called Franco-Ontarians, and thereby re-launching the language-of-instruction controversy in a new setting. In other words, historians have no choice but to take seriously from the beginning the specific context (however located) within the larger educational (internationalist) space of language-of-instruction debates and experience (that presumably can only be appropriately recognized after comprehensive research).

One approach to reconciling an appreciation of human uniqueness with evidence of common ideas and behavior emerged from my research in regional history. The tendency in such research has been to highlight certain distinguishing features in order to define a region's specificity. Instead, the approach proposed for the "new regional history" recognized that any one feature can undoubtedly be found elsewhere as well; for this reason, a region's specificity results from the distinguishing combination of such features (Gaffield 1991, 1994).

Two research steps are thus required: first, the study in specific contexts of unique articulations of non-unique phenomena; and the study of the range of diversity among these articulations with a view toward the larger understanding of the relevant historical processes as well as to situate the history of the specific region comparatively. From this perspective, the specificity of one region reflects the unique ways in which such familiar features combine and re-combine over time. Sylvia Kesper-Biermann helpfully emphasizes the importance of studying state and non-state actors, and this emphasis is certainly key in interpreting regional history in terms of unique articulations of non-unique phenomena. To take another example, the educational histories of Canada and Germany include many common features but the ways in which these features come together distinguishes their historical experiences and thus, it might be said, their relevant educational spaces. In any event, I will continue to reflect on ways to realize the potential of educational spaces to enhance this approach to deepening our insights to the complex changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In addition, I am intrigued by the possibilities of pursuing Sylvia Kesper-Biermann's concept by taking advantage of Digital Scholarship (Gaffield 2014). The "spatial turn" has left many historians justifiably scrambling to learn GIS (Geographic information system) as well as new visualization methods to enrich both their interpretative skills and to enhance their presentation of findings. The ability to analyze unprecedented quantities of individual-level evidence of human expression and action at multiple levels of aggregation and dis-aggregation certainly implies that diverse educational spaces could be interpretively explored in familiar and new ways. Indeed, this work would build on the initial success of scholars like Michael Katz in creating databases to document the changing experience of youth as going to school became characteristic in mid-nineteenth century cities (Katz 1975).

While such pioneering studies are fragmentary by today's standards, Katz and others re-framed historical debate by simply asking and systematically addressing the question of "who went to school?" In this work, considerable attention was paid to the geography of schooling although, of course, not in the way that Sylvia Kesper-Biermann is suggesting for the concept of educational spaces. Nonetheless, the opportunity to integrate temporal and spatial analyses in interpreting the increasingly large and complete data now available especially for the nineteenth century seems highly relevant for future research. We could digitally map various educational spaces as dynamic three-dimensional visualizations that change over time. We could simultaneously map multiple educational spaces in order to reveal overlaps and relative distances. To do so, of course, we would have to choose a base map as well as make interpretive cartographic decisions all along the way. And how would we compare in practice educational spaces within which ideas flowed as opposed to those of policies or practices? (for examples from other fields, see Bonnell/Fortin 2014).

It is also noteworthy that the increasing importance of linked data opens analytic doors to identifying and analyzing interactions, perceptions and relations as both defining and reflecting educational spaces. The potential of this approach is suggested by the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure (CCRI) which offers both individual-level education-relat-

ed evidence (school attendance, literacy, mother tongue) as well as contextual data (created from documentary sources) that are together geo-referenced (census enumeration divisions) in a way that invites interpretive (re)compositions of historical spaces (Gaffield 2007).

In my own research, CCRI has enabled insight into linguistic zones that transgress provincial borders (Gaffield/Moldofsky/Rollwagen 2014). One could imagine new studies of education that similarly problematize rather than take for granted the Québec and Ontario jurisdictions. Since the inherent oneness of theory and method means that the value of educational concepts depends upon the ways in which they are pursued in research projects, the next step would be to explore how this promising concept would inform research strategies including the selection of evidence.

The deep complexity of the past calls for successive attempts to “fail better” (to borrow the compelling phrase of Samuel Beckett) by both building on and moving beyond previous perspectives and research strategies. In this sense, the concept of educational spaces offers a promising contribution to the endless pursuit of integrated interpretations that do justice to the wonder of human existence.

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Prof. Dr. Chad Gaffield, University of Toronto, Department of History, 55 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa ON Canada K1N 6N5, gaffield@uOttawa.ca