

On the design of school spaces and their uses...

PROFESSOR GERT BIESTA (Brunel University, London and ArtEZ Institute of Arts, Netherlands) works in the areas of educational theory and philosophy, engaging with questions that promote discussion of education's purpose and its role in promoting much more than a restricted notion of learning.

As a member of the Steering Committee for the [Design Matters](#) project, his theoretical interests are applied in architectural concerns too and this interview spans both fields – in summary, we discussed the changing vocabulary whereby *classrooms* become *learning spaces* and how this relates to what he wryly terms “learnification”. I’d first come across the word in this [article](#) where he proposes the “deliberately ugly term” to refer to “the translation of everything there is to say about education in terms of learning and learners” (2009:38). It’s well worth reading but if you don’t have access to the journal then the book, [Good Education in an Age of Measurement](#), develops similar ground and there’s more about his work on his personal site, <http://www.gertbiesta.com>

Especially in the English language, we seem to be moving away from talking about “classrooms”, a noun based around a social unit of a *class* and moving towards what they often use in England is “learning spaces”. So we’ve moved from a social terming of that room if you like to a more clean, psychological idea of what a room in a school building should or could do and I just wondered if that struck any chords with your own educational research in terms of learning and what might be the gains and losses in moving from “classrooms” say to “learning spaces”?

Yes, that’s a nice question because a couple of years ago I presented a paper and I still would like to write it up but I liked the title which was “Creating Spaces for Learning or Making Room for Education?” So I played with the room but not room in terms of the classroom then but actually how within this whole turn towards creating spaces for learning whether there is still room for education or whether education risks being driven out if we transform schools into places for learning. That has been quite a big occupation or preoccupation of mine and this has to do with this phenomenon or development that I call “learnification” in my work. And learnification first of all happens at the level of language so it has to do with the fact that in the way in which people talk about education issues we see this notion of learning emerging in all kinds of ways. My concern there is that learning for me is a process language because learning can happen in all kinds of settings and for all kinds of reasons and in English it’s also an individualistic language because learning is something you do yourself. So even if you have communities of learning ultimately it comes back to individuals.

My main problem with the language of learning is that I would say the point of education is not that students *learn*. That doesn’t mean that learning has no role in education but education needs to say something more specific, it needs to engage with the question of the content of the learning, so the *what* of the learning you can say. But most importantly with the purposes of the learning and I see in a lot of the language of learning that this question of purpose is either not asked or it’s already answered in a particular way. If you say “We redesigned the school as a place for learning”, then it looks like anything is possible but quite often there are very strict definitions of the *kind* of learning that should actually happen. And those definitions are often much stricter than what I think education should do so a lot of it ends up in producing results that can be measured in terms of academic achievements.

So it kind of becomes self-propagating in that sense?



On the design of school spaces and their uses...

If people don't reflect on the question of purpose then in a sense, particular definitions of purpose come in and occupy that space. So if you don't think about it or never ask the question then before you know it the question has already been answered. That's why I think it's so important to at least ask the question, "What is the purpose of what we're doing? Why are we here together in this building or in this space or in this room?" And for me this learning spaces or places of learning is therefore also very unhelpful as a way to talk about what the school for example is because in articulating it in that way again we do not say anything about the *what* and the *why* of the learning. And learning can mean different things so I often give a couple of examples where the word learning is used like learning to ride a bike or learning that 2 and 2 equals 4 but also learning to be patient or learning that you're not good at something. Those all are instances of learning and when we say the school is a place for learning well we simply don't say what kind of learning we're after which means...which doesn't mean that nothing happens. A lot of things happen without reason or without thinking about it. And I think a lot of children actually learn that they are not good at a lot of things in high school.

We used to say or would think of learning as a transitive verb, so you have to learn *something* just as you walk *somewhere* and run *somewhere* but more and more it seems to be coming an intransitive verb so it's just about learning. And the object, what it is, and I think this is what you're talking about, the purpose of it is disappearing almost. It's a purely psychological activity and we've lost the social, political or whatever it is. You have to learn something, what's the nature of that something? And that seems to be...

So it's partly you can say the poverty of the language of learning that simply these questions of purpose and content and relationships do not immediately come with talking in terms of learning. So there is that danger in the language of learning. In part of my work I go even further because I think that learning in itself is also a very particular way in which we engage with the world for example. So learning is very much an act of understanding, making sense and I've tried to say that if that's the only way in which we understand what it means to be a human being, that's actually quite limited. Because I think there is more to our life than just that we see the world as an object we have to make sense of. And I see quite a lot of learning theory for example also just coming with this assumption and never asking what kind of underlying, normative ideas about human beings are at stake there. For me that's not a problem with learning actually, it's mostly seen as a kind of adaptive process that's issued from the self. Now I don't know whether you want to go in this direction but the thing that is not on the radar when you think of learning as sense-making and understanding and adjusting to changes in the environment, is the thing that goes in the opposite direction – where you are being spoken to or you are being addressed or you are being questioned. So learning in that sense comes very much with a kind of individualistic, almost neoliberal, agenda that says the self is the centre of the world and the world is just an object that we either make sense of or that we use for our own pleasure or our own needs. And I'm interested in this other direction because I think what it means to be a human being is not just driven by yourself but it has a lot to do with how other people speak to you and what you do in response to that speech. And for me the dynamics of education have also a lot to do with that. So education partly is about learning, sense-making, understanding but I think education also is about opening up children and young people to things that come from the outside that put them into question, for example. If we say the school is just a space for learning, then this other direction is also not on the radar and before you know it the space for learning becomes a very neo-liberal, self-expression, space.



On the design of school spaces and their uses...

Again and again, there's the importance of independent learning, autonomous learning emphasised. And the words do change but the idea is there and I think it's hard to separate from forms of assessment because perhaps forms of assessment can manage it (the education process) if it's reduced to independent learning, more easily. But in terms of architecture and independent learning, there seems to be a connection there too. Part of the aim of this blog is to I suppose try and get educationalists and architects speaking perhaps not the *same* language because that might not be a good thing even but at least to have some kind of common vocabulary. How... this is a difficult question! But how might you move towards getting two such different camps a little bit closer?

What I've seen in my own experience is that the architects I've met are, want to do a good job for other people so they really have a kind of service intuition where they say, "We really want to build a building that works for you", for example. That puts quite an onus on educators in such a relationship because then the educators need to be able to really say what kind of building they actually need. The danger I see here is that then the architects do not contribute their own thinking to this dialogue so there is at least one issue in relation to how we should think of this relationship and how these parties can get into better conversation. I would want architects also to show their whole expertise and put that on the table as well. And I'm saying that because what I'm personally concerned about is that there are a lot of fashions in education like these *learning spaces* and then architects can say "Of course we can design this for you if you want to." Whereas I see a lot of good architecture that actually raises very fundamental questions about what space is, what public space is, what democratic space is and they also manage to show in actual buildings the *issues* there. And I think these are really important questions that people in education should also think about. If you say the school is a space where children can learn, before you know it you begin to individualise this learning. Whereas if you say the school is basically an institution that in some way has to be in connection with the public sphere and the question of democracy then that not only raises important questions for education but also for the buildings you design, then. If you say the optimal education is personalised learning then you should just create cubicles where children can be doing their personalised learning. So I think that the real challenge is to get a good educational discussion going between these two parties and I think that architects have something to offer there both in terms of their theory and their practice but then they need to think about democratic architecture and questions of public space and not just functional space for learning.

Yes, and presumably educationalists need to come out of... certainly teachers working in school I mean everybody's busy, architects are really busy but to try and find the space to come out of their established patterns of doing things which is difficult but... something to aim for?

Yes and maybe to finish with an image. I once did a workshop with school leaders about democratic schools and I gave them a task to design a democratic school building which was really interesting because they came up with fantastic buildings with all kinds of...they had all the flexibility and individuality and whatever. And they presented all that and it was beautiful, interesting and then I said, "Are you interested in my view of what a democratic school building looks like?" and they said, "Yeah, of course!" - they were polite! And then I just drew a rectangle and I said, "For me the essence of democracy is that you are together in this space and have no choice of or with whom you are together." And for me just to mark out a space, the challenge is to be together in that space, that's for me where the essence of a democratic school building lies. So if you think that a democratic school is precisely a neo-liberal space where everyone can do their own thing then you have not understood what the real challenge of what democracy is.



On the design of school spaces and their uses...

Well thank you very much - that's great! And it goes back not just to the purpose of education but the purpose of architecture - why are we building these buildings? To allow people the "freedom" to *not* be together? Or to learn some lessons about the difficulty *of* being together...

And I think Hertzberger* understands that at the level of his theory and sometimes he also gets pretty close in the actual buildings so that's why I find him interesting precisely in engaging with the question of public space - and build *that* into a school.

* before the interview began, we were discussing the architect Herman Hertzberger's obvious interest in space *for* people and the way in which he seems to give people the spatial resources to go on and create their own spaces.

This interview between Gert Biesta and Adam Wood took place in Manchester on 25th April 2015.

