Place as Interface, Sensory-Data, and Phronesis

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This paper uses the example of the Plain of Jars, as a physical and digital place, to illustrate how to cultivate the sense of wonder to the sense of knowing in-between the computer screen and user experience. As such, this paper argues that place is an interface because place can be an imagined meeting point, one that shifts us outside of the borders and politics of the computer interface and the potential passively oppressive infrastructure of the classroom into a place where we adjust our subjectivities, where we allow multiples to have agency in expertise. This isn't a rejection of computer-based learning. In fact, use of computer supported learning environments can supplement peer exchanges of expertise, particularly with the advances in geographical information systems that allow us to see into places and vernacular web accounts that allow us to read about places. In sum, sensory-data, experiential knowledge or phronesis, is accessible through places on or off screen.

In "The Politics of the Interface," Selfe and Selfe (1994) argue that the computer, a central instruction space, contains a border that is constructed along ideological axes of cultural power and class privilege. As such, the computer interface demonstrates the politics of data representations because these representations pass along asymmetrical power relations that shape education along the lines of Eurocentric historical and social values. Selfe and Selfe compare the computer interface to Pratt's (1991) contact zone in that the interface is a site where social spaces meet, clash, and grapple with each other. Thus, computer supported writing, or computer supported learning environments, are not egalitarian spaces because they neglect technological underclasses and are discursively designed for and by a technically and linguistically privileged class. With this in mind, this contact zone is potentially problematic for computers and writing: where does a person of difference compose from if they exist outside these ideological borders of the computer interface? With what can a person of difference engage within this territory? But, more importantly, how can students or people of difference in general bring in their experiential knowledge through these borders?

I suggest that looking at place as an interface can be one approach to this issue of the politics of the interface. This approach requires not looking at the binary of the border as *either or*, but instead I approach the border of this

contact zone as fluid and mobile and made permeable and possible through the movement of students' bodies and imaginations and through the experience gained by moving within the screen and off the screen. For this reason, offering a look at places can bring about meaningful peer exchanges and give students a practical social field (Edbauer, 2005) from which to write, compose, make, or create and from which to experience expertise. In this paper, I use the example of the Plain of Jars, as a physical and digital place, to illustrate how to cultivate meaningful movements from the sense of wonder to the sense of knowing and to cultivate movements in-between the computer screens. As such, this paper argues that place is an interface because place can be an imagined meeting point, one that shifts us outside of the borders and politics of the computer interface and the potential passively oppressive infrastructure of the classroom into a place where our subjectivities are mediated by more than the computer interface, where we allow multiples to have agency in expertise. This isn't a rejection of computer-based learning. In fact, use of computer supported learning environments can supplement peer exchanges of expertise, particularly with the advances in geographical information systems that allow us to see into places and vernacular web accounts that allow us to read about places. While we can't possibly take everyone on a walk through the places we speak of, we can offer digital information about these places, to access digital phronesis.

From Computers to Ecologies

More recently, Gane and Beer (2008) suggest interfaces are cultural and should be understood as spatial forms that are tied to broader sets of social and cultural dynamics. However, before this idea, Selfe and Selfe (1994) argued that the interface is a contact zone in digital environments. Looking at their work first offers a good foundation for understanding how the electronic contact zone also enacts borders. I will use literature following this work to build to the idea that technologies, spaces, places, and bodies make up an ecology in which multiple interfaces become possible. However, I distinguish place itself as the interface in which students have agency and with which students can access peer experience at the level of the classroom and at the level of networked information. Place is mobile and embodied: as a body enacts movement in, in-between, and off the screen, places shift accordingly. As such, a student's sense of place becomes a contact zone for multiple environments.

Selfe and Selfe (1994) were responding to changing college student demographics and emerging technology use in the classroom. They argue the computer interface is not an egalitarian space because of multiple issues with

access from the design choices to linguistic choices, not to mention the social and cultural factors that also condition the response to these choices. In addition to the focus on electronic spaces, Selfe and Selfe's discussion of access problems faced by educators wishing to use digital technologies has spurred studies in pedagogy. For example, studies on instructional spaces find that writing in digital spaces occurs "within a matrix of local and global policies, standards, and practices" (DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill, 2005). Computer learning environments position students to work within multiple systems of literacies in ways that writing alone does not. Students must be familiar with how to type, use software or programs, and so on in addition to the core learning goals of the writing classroom. Furthermore, as students must multitask in this manner, they are asked to sit predominantly in one place. In "Hacking Spaces," Walls, Schopieray, and DeVoss (2009) reiterate Banning and Canard's (1986) concern that "use of the physical environment is perhaps the least understood and the most neglected." Walls et al. (2009) identify spaces as long-standing artifacts that are not apt to change although pedagogical practices have changed in relation to emerging technologies. As a resolution, they offer a framework for space designs that enable physical bodily movement. Adding to this discussion, Syverson (1999) argues that composition depends on shared interactions between people and various structures and positions composition as a distributed and socially situated practice. Edbauer (2005) later articulates this as an ecological approach to composition that sets the scene of writing into a social field. Meanwhile, Reynolds (2004) gives us the idea that places are mobile in that places also move as bodies move in and out of spaces. Out of these approaches grows a burgeoning interest in the pedagogical value of places outside of the classroom for understanding a culture's rhetorical practices (Metzger and Katz, 2010), vernacular discourse (Hess, 2011), and the interrelated perspectives and layers of histories embedded in landscapes (Schmitt, 2015). While helpful, these approaches zoom out from the interfaces such as the computer and into the ecology of the digital environment. I want to zoom back in to see how this might come together with the computer in the classroom.

From Spatial Organization to Sensory-Data

Using the insights gained about interfaces (Gane and Beer, 2008), classroom spaces (DeVoss et al., 2005; Walls et al., 2009), and composition as an ecologically situated practice (DeVoss, Haas, and Eyman, 2006), I suggest a framework that ties these insights together through a strategic use of *place as an interface* for accessing peer knowledge. Although Walls et al. (2009) have published an article with a similar concept as the subtitle, their work focuses

on defining place as the classroom space and as such they argue about spatial arrangement. In contrast, I define place from a phenomenological perspective in which place is filled with sensory-data (Casey, 1996). Sensory-data is the information obtained through perception, but more specifically, through presence, through the skin, through the contact of the inside and the outside (Grosz, 2001). In this approach, place is not only about spatial arrangement but is also a configuration of both spatial arrangement and time, a configuration held together by the stickiness of localized sensations. Sensory-data is indexed through the student, and data processing and transfers occur through movements and engagements. With this in mind, place is the configuration of space and time through which movements are enacted and performed, through which sensory-data (information) indexed by personal experience (perception) becomes mobile and comes into contact other kinds of information. As such, place becomes an interface for accessing and processing sensory-data through student's movements and peer interactivity. Together, places as interfaces enable one part of a system to be sensitive to other parts of another system.

On Phronesis and Making Sense

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that there are three kinds of knowledge associated with wisdom: episteme, techné, and phronesis (Halverson, 2004). For ethical well-being, Aristotle postulates that we must acquire deliberative, emotional, and social skills that enable us to make sense of things as a whole. Halverson (2004) explains the relationship between episteme and techné. Episteme is both necessary and universal; it can be represented apart from the knower, codified into systems of thought, and leads to reproducible effects under similar circumstances. Techné refers to the knowledge of making, ranging from the arts of construction to the creation of states of affairs. Halverson suggests phronesis, or practical wisdom, is a result of how individuals act based on their interpretation of contextual particulars. Similarly, Delagrange (2011) interprets episteme as theoretical knowledge and techné as artistic knowledge. However, while Halverson (2004) positions phronesis as what emerges from in between episteme and techné, Delagrange (2011) positions techné as what emerges from in between episteme and phronesis. The difference draws our attention to the work educators must do. In Halverson's understanding of phronesis, we can be passive about our productions of knowledge: we can understand the universals and understand the processes, and from this we will be able to execute wisdom without actively engaging beyond the level of knowing something historically known and historically doable. Although the three simultaneously inform each other, Delagrange's

model positions phronesis, practical wisdom, as necessary for techné, particularly because techné as "'making,' [is] a productive oscillation between knowledge in the head and knowledge in the hand" (p. 35). Phronesis requires a situated understanding of the habits and the relations located in a place. Thus, to make sense, we need to negotiate what is in our heads with what is in our hands.

As another approach, Reynolds (2004) suggests moving through the world is what we all have in common, as part of our geographical identity, but this is a romantic reading. Reynolds writes, "What we do have in common with students are the places where we meet them as well as everyday experiences in space: moving through streets or hallways, working in institutional rooms, or commuting to work and school" (p. 4). Although this is to some degree true, there are power differences in mobility (Massey, 1993), particularly when we consider the demographic Selfe and Selfe (1994) refer to students from different countries, histories, backgrounds, and languages. So, it is presumptuous to think that we have things in common because we share the college campus as a social space. Students flow into the classroom and they flow back into their lives, and this flow occurs at and in different rhythms and routes.

Also where do we actually meet with students? We meet them in institutional spaces such as our offices, conference rooms, hallways, the classroom, during our commutes and such. This is a limited sample of moving through the world! If this is what we have in common, we risk our learning spaces and the boundaries that contain them to be directed by higher systems of power.

Perhaps as a response, Reynolds takes her students on walks, and this is a nice expansion of the classroom space, but it still nonetheless expands the institutional space of the classroom in doing so. A similar situation occurs with Reynold's example of Socrates and Phaedrus' walk outside of the city. Socrates tells Phaedrus the tale of Boreas and Orithyia at the bank of the Ilissus, but Phaedrus really wants to know if the tale is true. At the location of where Phaedrus thinks it could have happened, he says, "And is this the exact spot? The little stream is delightfully clear and bright; I can fancy that there might have been maidens playing near" (p. 95). Phaedrus enacts wonder. Through the place and by imagining through time, Phaedrus wonders what is possible. *Is it possible* that Boreas and Orithyia were once here? Phaedrus uses both what is in his head (Socrates' teachings) and what is in his hands (the scene of where it once might have happened) to come to his own experience of knowing, to come to a point where it was possible to trust his own judgment through sensory-data. So, perhaps Reynolds was correct about having our students move about in the world through walking and the learning experiences it affords. But is it possible that the walking between students and instructor, or the walking between Phaedrus and Socrates, is not actually what

brings about this experience of coming to knowing something. The walk is in fact dictated by the rules of the instructor and asymmetrical power relations. As such, it's not completely geographical identity, but rather it is engaging in places that brings about experiential learning. It is Phaedrus' engagement with the bank of the Ilissus that situates his understanding, makes him wonder, and pushes him towards phronesis. It is what is sensed, sensory-data, that enables making sense.

The Plain of Jars Interlude

The Plain of Jars, located in Phonsavan, Laos is an ancient archaeological site that the United States air bombed between 1963 and 1974 every eight minutes, twenty-four hours a day, for a decade. Yet, recently, the Plain of Jars has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site nominee on account of the ancient monolithic jars dating back to the Jurassic period. Although unexploded ordnances continue to pose daily threats for villagers, the narrative about cultural heritage is what stands. The Plain of Jars was part of a covert military operation connected to the larger Vietnam War, but it is mostly represented as an emblem of humanity's shared universal cultural heritage. What we understand and know about this place is entangled in myths and legends. When those who have a connection to this place try to detangle this, the politics of the interface interfere.

Phonsavan's color pallet is an arrangement of blues, greens, and yellows. But when the ground breaks free from the green, shades of rust are visible in the reddish brown dirt. The decrepit military tanks and rusting bomb shells left behind from the war have taken on this shade of dirt. They have slowly assimilated to this place as those involved have slowly assimilated to their new ways of living or their lives in the United States. When tourists go to Phonsavan, they go to view the jars. They go to view the blues, greens, and yellows, but I wonder what they make of the rust and the red earth in the surrounding? Do they *wonder* about it? What do they make of the things that have come to belong there, the empty shells or the unexploded ordnances still buried underneath the green? How do we ethically resolve our perceptions with what we are told? How can we say something that is outside of what can be said?

Although I've chosen an example close to me because I am a refugee, I believe that due to changing student demographics, we will at some point have students in our classrooms with "examples that are close to them." We can't ignore the U.S.'s immigration and refugee landscape and how difficult it is to compose as if we have occupied similar subjectivities simply because we have made it into the college classroom. In 1994, Selfe and Selfe noted that by

the end of 2000, 40% of students will have come from a non-English speaking background. Yet, more than twenty years later, collaborative systems and computer interfaces continue to be organized around English and Eurocentric ideologies and designs. While features of computer interfaces have been used by system developers to gain a sense of appropriate behavior framing, this sense of appropriate behavioral framing conditions for a particular identity result that is conditioned by western patterns of understanding, associations, and expectations.

On Using Place as an Interface

First of all, a place does not have to be a physical meeting point. Place embodies sensory-data (Casey, 1996). Place is a meaningful location that refers to the material setting for social relations. Through participation and daily performances, we produce knowledge about a place and produce a sense of belonging (Cresswell, 2002). Cresswell writes, "Even imaginary places, like Hogwarts School in Harry Potter novels, have an imaginary materiality of rooms, staircases and tunnels" where things and actions take place (p. 7). Placeness is sustained by patterns of use, which makes placeness take on the characteristics of the behaviors enacted. We get a sense of something from a place by being there, but we can also get a sense of a place by how it's represented because it shapes how we perceive it. For example, media spaces can become places through the connections and patterns of use among users. Sometimes, placeness can emerge without the underlying notion of space, and this can be seen in virtual communities or diaspora communities who hold together their places through their behaviors and affections.

As mentioned earlier, Gane and Beer (2008) suggests interfaces are cultural and should be understood as spatial forms that are tied to broader sets of social and cultural dynamics. Using this definition of interface allows us to see that an interface is not limited to the screen. For this reason, a place as an interface would allow others to access sensory-data of that place. Place also takes us in-between the screen. For example, in *Voices from the Plain of Jars,* Branfman (2013) uses multimodal composition methods to engage refugee villagers in storytelling. The text was originally published in 1972 as a collective memoir authored in part by the villagers who experienced life under automated air war. Although the book didn't sell well as admitted by the author, it did receive wide critical acclaim. Its material appeared in television shows, opinion editorials in the *New York Times*, and peace movement publications. It now lives as a physical book and an e-book. It offers a space both inside and outside of the classroom for engagement. Its sense of place exists outside the institution. Its engagements may occur in the classroom, but on another level

the engagements occur at the level of the imagination and wonder.

From the reader or viewer's perspective, the images and texts create for them a sense of place through the sensory-data. There are consistent themes of bombs raining from the skies, colored rain, maimed bodies, disfigured homes and landscapes. The reader gets a sense of the place through the villagers' sensory-embedded drawings. From the other side, the composer displays their own sensations through art. The chaos experienced is framed into the making of their art (Grosz, 2001). As the composer is drawing from their own experience, the audience is drawing from their own experience. This act of drawing is situated through the interface, and both engage in expertise through their own ability to make sense and interpret sensations. The Plain of Jars moves from myth, or epistemology, to phronesis through sensory-data, and in a way through techné as making sense. Users arrange their understandings to make sense in ways that mean something to them.

Conclusion

With digital media and the computer, we can further explore places and get a sense of them. By zooming in, we see that places help us filter relevant information that we have experience with. By using place as an interface, the borders of the electronic contact zone bleed into what we know about the world, and what we know can move in-between the computer interface and our institutional spaces by allowing both audience and composer to exercise their expertise. Beyond being in a place, thinking through a place shapes the processing of information. When you are in a place, you understand what might go on in that place. You take on the characteristics of that place through wonder. Where we come from composes us and shapes what we compose because it is a lived, embodied experience of those places. Thus, in using place as an interface, we explore connections, relations, habits, patterns of experience, and engage in the possibility of knowing things about multiple realities, each other. The computer can afford us connections to interfaces. I propose that we continue to explore ways in which we can use place as an interface to allow others to access their experiential knowledge not for only composition but also as a resource in their daily transactions. As for the Plain of Jars, to understand its history, or any place really, you can only understand the history through what is represented and your own experience. Now, we could connect different experiences and could access the sensory-data of a place. And by extension, the sensations of others, even those vastly different from us, are potentially mobile across contact zones. This approach addresses the politics of the interface, and it offers a strategy for empathetic and ethically oriented engagements.

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