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RESPONSE

Putting the individual in context: paths, capitals and topologies of learning

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Introduction

The perspective set out by Rutten (2014) contributes to a growing body of work that places individuals, their social context and practice at the fore in analyses of the spatiality of knowledge (see also, for instance, Ibert, 2007, 2010; Vallance, 2011; Howells, 2012). Indeed, the distinction made between ability and willingness by drawing on the work of Reagans and McEvily (2003), and the associated ideas that an individual's multiple social contexts affect ability to learn while social capital affects willingness, correspond with arguments I have made previously about the social foundations of stretched relational spaces of learning (Faulconbridge, 2006, 2007a, 2010; Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2012), and the situated, but not necessarily local, politics, reciprocity, trust and mutual understanding that encourage collective learning endeavours (Faulconbridge, 2007b, 2007c). Similarly, the underlying argument that distinctions between tacit and explicit knowledge are best understood as variations in the social-contextual embeddedness of knowledge sits comfortably with, and helps provide an analytical clarity to, Polanyi's (1967) and more recently Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) assertions that all knowledges are more or less tacit *and* explicit, and never solely one or the other. Intuitively, then, the response to Rutten's paper is positive, particularly because of the work it does to synthesise ideas emerging from across the social sciences. Rutten's paper does, however, leave me with two nagging concerns, one theoretical and one empirical.

Two dilemmas

Theoretically, there is a danger that by focussing on social context and capital, analyses become overly socially embedded (cf. Granovetter, 1985). A fetish of the social at the expense of the embodied and material risks producing an understanding of the

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spatiality of learning that ignores many of the advances of science and technology studies of knowledge, and work on learning as practice in particular. Two examples illustrate this risk. First, as Polanyi (1967) acknowledged through his discussion of the tacit dimensions of cycling, and more recently as Amin and Roberts (2008), Lave and Wenger (1991) and Gherardi and Nicolini (2006) demonstrate by analysing the craft skills associated with various occupations, an important dimension of certain types of learning is its embodied nature. In some situations, for example when learning to cut meat as a butcher or to walk safely across a roof as a builder, learning occurs through touch and physical senses (Strati, 2007). While such embodied learning might be included in discussions of the social dimensions of learning ability, for me such issues and their geographical implications need more attention than Rutten's approach can provide.

Second, the material dimensions of learning also seem conspicuously absent from Rutten's discussion. One of the main contributions of actor–network theory has been, through the notion of symmetry, to give agency to 'things' in analyses of everyday life. Social theories of practice (see Reckwitz, 2002; Shove, 2003) have developed this agenda and when applied to questions of learning (see Gherardi, 2009; Faulconbridge, 2010) help reveal the central role of more or less mobile objects. Particularly significant for questions about the socio-spatial context of learning, and especially in relation to debates about local/global geographies, is the identification of ubiquitous objects, such as spreadsheets, corporate manuals and common technological devices, which exist almost everywhere and provide a spatially expansive material substrate for learning. Similarly important are mobile objects which connect together spatially distributed individuals (into what Wenger (1998) calls a constellation of practice) and allow learning by fulfilling a boundary spanning role in terms of cognitive proximity. It is thus crucial to ensure any focus on social context and capital does not lead to an asymmetrical analysis in which the role of things in shaping the geographies of learning is missed.

These two theoretical dilemmas raised by Rutten's analysis are not fatal. They can be resolved simply through caution and a reminder that an inclusive approach which is not overly socially embedded is required. The bigger lesson for me, however, is that avoiding the common tendency to become captured by uni-dimensional analyses of what influences the geographies of learning is crucial. Rutten partly avoids such a trap by bringing questions of ability and willingness to the fore. Here I simply mean to suggest that the diverse and rich theoretical literature on learning needs to be still more expansively deployed in order to get to grips with the nuances of the spatiality of the process of learning itself.

Studying ability, willingness and moments of 'being there'

The empirical dilemma that Rutten's paper raises – how to study and analyse the spatiality of social context and capital – is as significant as the theoretical dilemmas discussed above. Unless it is resolved, there is a real danger that the potential of the ideas developed will not be realised. I focus on this dilemma for the remainder of my discussion. As already noted, there are many parallels between the argument made by Rutten about social context and capital and existing literatures. In an earlier review of similar debates, Gertler (2008, pp.206–7) cautions that, in developing such syntheses, the danger is that:

> … they consist largely of a set of logical assertions awaiting broader elaboration and substantiation. Among other critical gaps, we do not yet have a well-developed understanding of how knowledge is supposed to flow across long distances via global pipelines or under what circumstances this is more – or less – likely to be the case. In other words, both the precise mechanisms and the conditions that facilitate the flow of knowledge over long distances are not very well specified.

The challenge that Rutten's paper sets, then, is to identify a way of empirically operationalising ideas about relationships between ability and social context, and willingness and social capital. How might researchers take these ideas and transform them into a realisable strategy for investigating what determines the geography of learning in any particular situation? Rutten offers us few insights in this regard, yet the focus on individuals proposed does, I suggest, provide the methodological basis for the empirical operationalisation of ideas about ability and willingness. Before elaborating on this claim, let me first use the existing literature on the socio-spatial dynamics of learning to add some empirical flesh to the bones Rutten puts before us so as to identify the foci for any empirical operationalisation of an individual perspective.

In terms of ability and its link to social context, the parallels to debates about relational proximity (Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Faulconbridge, 2006; Gertler, 2008), absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) and cognitive distance/proximity (Nooteboom, 2000) are clear, albeit with the emphasis placed more firmly on social context in Rutten's analysis, rather than on the characteristics of knowledge itself. The significance of this connection becomes clear when the way work on relational proximity, absorptive capacity and cognitive distance/proximity has been used to analyse the geographies of learning is considered. An example of this is the attempt of Asheim *et al.* (2007) to differentiate between analytical, synthetic and symbolic knowledges and their geographies. Key to defining each category is the link among the social contexts in which learning occurs, the more or less tacit dimensions of the knowledge, and in turn the greater or lesser degrees of spatial mobility of the knowledge form. Social context in this work is understood to mean the social engagements through which learning occurs; for instance, meetings with clients or hanging out in a group of craftspeople, with contexts requiring regular face-to-face contact, meaning knowledge is likely to be less mobile. In itself, this does not correspond with Rutten's reading of social context, instead focussing on the embodied nature of learning (absent in Rutten's analysis). Gertler (2008), however, builds on Asheim *et al.*'s work and argues that for each knowledge type, degrees of mobility are also determined by underlying forms of social affinity.

In introducing the notion of social affinity, Gertler (2008) draws attention to how the social context that facilitates spatially-stretched learning and knowledge mobility is associated not only with the moment of learning, but also with the cognitive process of learning. In particular, he argues that social affinity can emerge as a result of forms of shared social experience, and that affinities between spatially distributed groups can overcome the need for physical proximity. Experiences producing affinity can, according to Gertler, range from completing the same education, most notably the same type of degree, to shared experiences of working for the same employer or in the same occupation. We might also add to this list participation in the same (on or offline) communities (of practice), serving the same clients or markets, and (to bring objects to the fore) reading the same journals or using the same machines as part of everyday work practice.

In terms of Rutten's discussion of ability and social context, the work of Gertler (2008) draws attention to questions about how 'being there' at particular places and times produces the context that allows non-local geographies of learning. Whether this means being there to facilitate the embodied nature of learning, or being there and having experiences that produce affinities that allow stretched learning, the life paths of individuals are crucial for understanding the potential for stretched learning. I return to this idea again below.

Rutten's second key point focuses on the need to disaggregate the process of learning and the production of new understanding (ability) from the social specificities of learning events and networks (willingness). This point is well taken, not least because in many ways analysis of regions, clusters and other territorially-bounded spaces of learning has been overly dominated by concerns about the production of serendipity, reciprocity, trust, shared enterprise and institutional thickness (see Morgan, 2004; Storper and Venables, 2004) and the apparent local fixity of such phenomenon. In Granovetter's (1973) work on weak ties, and more recently in the guise of debates about temporary proximity (Power and Jansson, 2008; Torre, 2008), it is recognised that both know-who and the social bonds that underlie learning need not be limited to those in direct physical proximity. Hence, opening up the question of how social capital might be produced in a way that facilitates spatially stretched learning, as Rutten's analysis does, is a valuable endeavour. Indeed, Howells (2012) reaches a very similar conclusion in his discussion of how to advance understandings of the geographies of knowledge and innovation, arguing that one of the main challenges facing workers today is the development of the kinds of networks that allow them to tap into spatially-distributed learning and innovation opportunities.

Significantly for my argument here, questions about the spatiality of the social underpinnings of learning willingness lead us to a similar point as discussions of ability and social context: how might we analyse the way individuals develop (by 'being there' in embodied or virtual form) the social capital networks that allow for spatially-stretched learning? To address this question, I return to my earlier claims that Rutten's focus on the individual potentially provides a way of addressing the empirical conundrums raised by his analysis, and that the life paths of individuals may be a useful analytical lens.

Individual paths, habitus and the production of topologies of learning

A key premise of Rutten's paper is that an individual perspective on social context and capital is analytically useful. The discussion above reveals that, in particular, moments of being there are crucial to understanding the opportunities an individual has to participate in global spaces of learning. To explore Rutten's ideas, it would seem useful to track the paths of individuals and ask questions about how these paths lend themselves more or less favourably to participation in global spaces of learning.

I adopt the term 'paths' deliberately, and in doing so take inspiration from Pred's extensive work on the time–space geography of everyday life (1977, 1981, 1983). While now somewhat dated, Pred's work draws our attention to the way

> the everyday shaping and reproduction of self and society, of individual and institution, come to be expressed as *specific* structure influenced and structure influencing *practices occurring at determinate locations in time and space,* or as time–space detailed situations that at one and the same time are rooted in past time–space detailed situations. (Pred, 1983, p.46, original emphasis)

For Pred, it was essential to recognise that with respect to any one individual, the zero-sum features of time and space serve to permit certain actions and prohibit others. In short, if someone spends time engaged in one practice (in some location), she cannot also be engaged in another practice somewhere else. Time availability determines what any one individual can and cannot do. In the context of the discussion here, this means asking questions about how life paths and the participation/experience of certain times and spaces enable an individual to engage in learning with particular geographical characteristics because of the social context and capital to which being there provides access.

Put another way, the question is about the spatio-temporal dynamics of an individual's life path and the learning affordances this creates. Figure 1 attempts to capture this by detailing some of the spatio-temporal dimensions of the being there associated with developing the affinities (context) and social capital that allows learning. The two different careers detailed in Figure 1 correspond with different life histories, with different places of work, education and socialising, and hence different individual local–global spaces of learning potential. Moments of being there (represented by grey circles in Figure 1) produce the social context and capital associated with learning ability and willingness respectively. Life paths influence opportunities for being there, in turn determining the geographies of learning.

In many ways, Figure 1 and the discussion in this section of the paper allude to the time/space specificities of the production of what, using the terminology of Bourdieu (1990), we might refer to as an individual's learning 'habitus'. Again, the adoption of this terminology is deliberate, intending to point to the often coupled development of both the social context and capital that Rutten suggests are important for learning. As Bourdieu's work reveals, individuals (through their life experiences) develop certain forms of cultural capital, this form of capital being most closely allied to what Rutten describes as 'context', as well as forms of social capital. Often the two types of capital emerge in tandem as a result of being there in elite spaces.

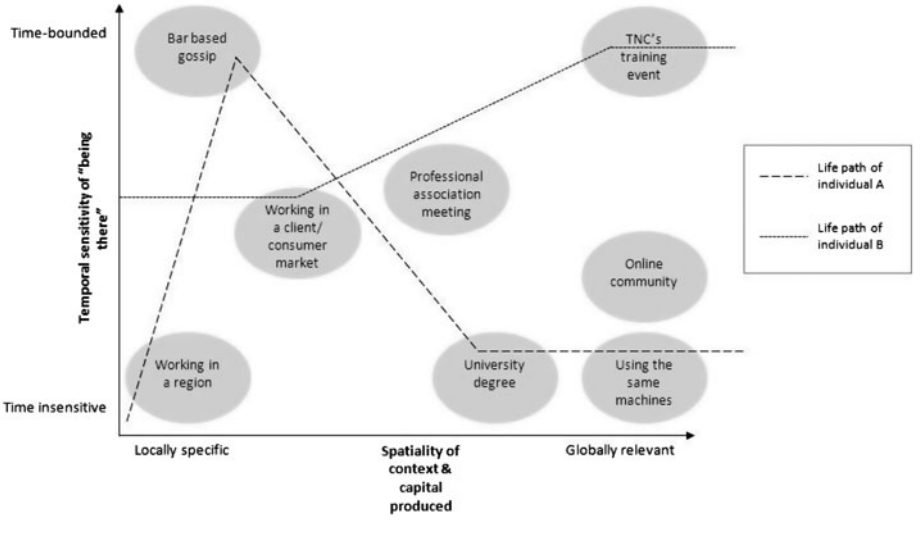

Figure 1. Moments of being there

In terms of individuals and their ability to engage in spatially-stretched learning, it is important to ask how particular spatio-temporal paths and presences are associated with the accrual of the social context *and/or* the social capital that is crucial for learning. It is feasible, for instance, that learning is made possible either as a result of cultural (context) and social capital affordances both gained from presence at one particular time and space, or as a result of the cultural capital gained in one time and space (for example from completing a degree) intersecting with the social capital gained from another time and place (for instance presence in a bar). In such a scenario, the former enables the cognitive process of learning, and the latter provides the required social lubrication.

Conclusions: the empirical opportunities of an individual perspective

The discussion above takes Rutten's suggestion that questions about the socio-spatial context of learning are addressed through an individual perspective. It offers both a theoretical corrective and also a mode of empirically operationalising such ideas. Empirically the suggestion is that an approach focussed on the individual, her life paths and the learning habitus this produces provides a way of making sense of what determines the geographies of learning. Such an approach has two implications for the way we think about the socio-spatial context of learning.

First, in the approach outlined here, the scale-perforating topologies of learning that are the main concern in literatures focussed on the geographies of knowledge become associated in important ways with the life paths of individuals (Amin, 2002). This shifts the emphasis away from the knowledge base being produced by learning in any situation and towards the particularities of the social actors (i.e. the individuals involved in learning and their habitus). This means analyses might focus squarely on the identity of the individuals involved in learning as a way of making sense of when scale-perforating topologies do or do not emerge.

Second, the approach proposed here moves debates about the role of regions and firms in structuring processes and spatialities of learning in new directions. It suggests that regions and firms, as well as any other community form, may act as mechanisms for constructing the spatio-temporal moments in which individuals can develop the cultural (context) and social capital needed for learning. Regions act as a microcosm in which the multiple life path experiences that individuals might need to accrue capital are made accessible in a bounded spatial context. By bringing together like minded people engaged in a loosely shared enterprise, and through organic and seeded moments of interaction, regions help lay the habitus foundations for learning. But this does not mean learning should be interpreted as having a disproportionate preponderance towards the local. Transnational corporations, through their knowledge management, team building and other strategies seek to seed similar habitus-producing processes to allow workers to engage in firm-wide, stretched learning. In sum, Rutten's suggestion of an individual perspective opens up a series of intriguing opportunities to rethink how we approach questions of the geographies of knowledge, in the process developing some of the conceptual ideas that have emerged over the past 15 years through a new focus on the individual, her life path and the influence on global topologies of learning.

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