

Mediated Bodies and Learning Space

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Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer's essay, "Re-thinking Bodies in the Traditional Classroom," applies Michel Foucault's framework of discipline and surveillance to analyze contemporary debates regarding online education. The essay suggests the need "to take a *closer look* at the ways bodies are *actually used/produced* in *schooling spaces*" (emphases added). To do so, Greenhalgh-Spencer interrogates "four *practices/objects of the traditional classroom*: the gaze, the chair, the desk, and the ability to move and touch" (emphasis added). Moreover, the author aims to dispel the myth that *traditional* classrooms are "*automatically* more humanizing" (emphasis added) than online schooling spaces and the assumption that physical bodies together in social space necessarily lead to individual and collective educational benefits. Indeed, Greenhalgh-Spencer employs insights from diverse theoretical traditions (post-structural history, visual culture, and somatics) to illustrate how classrooms deploy disciplinary techniques of normalization in everything from attention, bodily movement within the room, and physical comportment. While the effects of these techniques may or may not have educational benefits, they are nonetheless quite "harmful" (at least physically) to the (student) bodies that must conform to these regulatory practices. The author concludes that these harmful effects of the "traditional classroom" threaten the potential for "humanizing" spaces of education. In contrast, then, she offers an (admittedly) brief speculative discussion of the potential for online schooling to provide students opportunities for embodied learning through the "freedom" and "choice" of movement. This form of embodied learning, she argues, may ultimately allow for a type of schooling that is "more empowering."

In the following paragraphs, I explore the overarching argument and specific questions posed by Greenhalgh-Spencer regarding learning/space/classrooms and bodies. My aim here is to take up the author's invitation to think differently and deeply about the subject and space of embodiment and learning. I want to unpack some of the tacit assumptions within theorizing on education and space, concerning who (particularly) the learning subject is imagined "to be," and how and when she embodies learning (for example, how the body is made to perform and/or narrate particular practices of learning, power/knowledge and discipline across various places and spaces of learning and education). In other words, what forms of embodied learning are assumed and afforded within and across multiple modalities of schooling (whether the classroom is traditional or online)? How might a focus on embodied learning, itself, reveal a disciplinary "gaze" in which relations of power circulate through institutional arrangements, discursive practices and subject positions regarding education? How are physical movement and bodies always already mediated through particular regimes of truth, especially one that privileges liberal humanistic and/or modern frameworks of power and politics, subjectivity and

education? What epistemological, ethical, and political issues are made visible and invisible through this regime of truth? Moreover, what socio-historical practices frame what is possible and desirable in terms of technologies of education and the space(s) in which they are located?

I want to make two general points about bodies and education, learning and space. My first point concerns how embodiment becomes conflated with empowerment through the constitutive elements of individualism, freedom, and choice stitched together in both liberal and neoliberal educational discourses. As Greenhalgh-Spencer argues, bodies together in nearness do not necessarily lead to a positive social encounter with educational benefits to the individual. Can we similarly question the claim that embodied learning necessarily leads to “empowering education?” The author aptly demonstrates how classroom bodies are physically constrained through desks, chairs, and the disciplinary gaze of the teacher. And while recognizing the power of the teacher to still command surveillance through electronic observation of “work,” Greenhalgh-Spencer suggests that because the desk and chair are (optionally) removed from online school, students’ bodies are able to “move and touch” more freely and perhaps more authentically. My concern is that this image of the/a body that is free to choose when and how to move and touch reiterates a kind of voluntarism associated with liberal humanism. In addition, I worry that this particular iteration of embodiment as empowerment may (ironically) perpetuate a (disembodied) universal body that has not been classified, diagnosed, and regulated according to various embodied social identities or what we might call technologies of the self. How can we speak of students’ freedom and choice, proper posture and alignment without discussion of the particular disciplinary techniques of bodily comportment, affect, and attention that are produced, mediated and circulated through the materiality of the body associated with (but not limited to) such things as size, shape, skin, and other fleshly features, as well as vocal intonation, dialect, mannerisms, gestures, movement, and emotional expression? Each of these material elements of embodiment (and the meaning and power attached to them) is constituted by particular codes of intelligibility situated in particular times and places. In other words, the subject-position of the student is always already located within a discursive landscape of power/knowledge/body/spatial relations, regardless of whether the classroom space is in a “traditional” desk and chair arrangement or online. The body online and in the classroom is physically, symbolically, and socially nested in historical webs of the politics of schooling; the question becomes why this, why now?

For example, critical histories of modern schooling demonstrate how students and youth have been subject to disciplinary techniques of education that regulate particular bodies, identities, practices, and emotions (see especially indigenous histories). It is *not just* that students have been physically, socially, and culturally assimilated through “education” framed as “civilization” and “enlightenment.” It is *also* that youth have learned to become socially intelligible through physical measures that signify markers of identity and difference. In both of these cases, embodiment becomes as much as empowerment an interpellation into ways of being

that literally have market value through academic, social and cultural capital. Thinking about embodiment through this lens, then, underscores the productive yet regulating component of power/knowledge Foucault terms biopolitics.

The second area for consideration involves the juxtaposition of liberal-humanist, critical-postmodern (and I would add neo-liberal) ways of conceptualizing bodies and pedagogical space. Here I want to call attention to another aspect of mediation — that is, the specific learning technologies that are utilized in various spaces as well as the technologies of learning afforded. In her comparison, the author seems to draw sharp distinctions between the technology tools for learning in the “traditional” and those in the “online” classroom (the desk and the chair versus the computer and a “comfortable” or “mobile” form of sitting or standing while at home). First, it is important to remember that contemporary “physical” classrooms differ vastly in their physical dimensions within and across grade level, subject area, geographic location, public versus private status, economic foundation of the district, and age of the school, for example. Similarly, there is great variety in the way that online schooling is designed, developed, and deployed. Again, there are major factors (many economic) that contribute to this multiplicity of offerings. For some students, “online schooling” may require traveling to, sitting in and being confined to a local library surrounded by many kinds of bodies engaged in embodied activities of all sorts. I believe Greenhalgh-Spencer is attuned to these nuances and is not interested in vilifying or valorizing one form of educational setting over another. Yet, in the discussion of schooling as a form of embodied learning and as potentially more empowering due to the humanizing components of freedom and choice of movement, I wondered how she might broaden the discussion of mobility and physical space toward the very material inequities that shape students’ access to all forms of education.

The larger concern for me in theorizing the relationship between bodies and education is to explore the boundaries of what counts as learning, disciplinary power/knowledge, and technologies of embodiment. What are the historical conditions and discursive practices of bodies and institutional arrangements that frame how we think and talk about bodies and schooling? How can we think historically about what schools “do” with bodies in ways that are *both* regulating and empowering, and for what purposes? Critical historians remind us that the successful implementation of public education at the turn of the twentieth century was as much a project of Progressive idealism as a form of economic pragmatism (what were these youth to do, if they were not working on the farm, in the factories, or the mills due to newly implemented child labor laws?).¹ Similarly, sports and dance scholars suggest that sports (and other extra-curricular activities) can and do provide a productive yet normalizing curriculum of embodied learning, albeit not in the “traditional classroom.”² Like the author, I am not interested in pinpointing one particular modality of learning and forms of learning through the body. However, I would be cautious to imagine a relationship between bodies, learning, and space that does not foreground how schools and education function within the larger social

body and how embodiment is socially produced, contained, and resisted in particular spaces.

1. See, for example, John Rury, *Education and Social Change: Contours in American History* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

2. See, for example, Jan Wright, "Disciplining the Body: Power, Knowledge and Subjectivity in a Physical Education Lesson," in *Culture and Text*, eds. Alison Lee and Cate Poynton (Sidney: Allyn and Bacon, 2000).