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## 2 Borderland spaces: moving towards self-authorship

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The borderland spaces concept offers a powerful means for representing and reframing educational discourses (Hill et al, 2016). It encourages a relational examination of pedagogic spaces, identities and practices, inter-weaving the three socio-spatial perspectives of Barnett (2011): physical and material, educational, and interior. Through exploration and exemplification of borderland spaces we demonstrate that learning is both situated and embodied (Boddington and Boys, 2011). Physical locations are used in different ways by a diversity of staff and students, and this can establish productive relationships between space and learning. In this chapter we present a case study of undergraduate students disseminating their research in a novel professional setting, exposing their experiences of learning in a borderland space.

### **Theoretical context: self-authorship and borderland spaces**

#### **Self-authorship**

We begin with an initial premise that higher education educators should strive to move undergraduate students towards self-authorship. Self-authorship, in essence, is the ability to know oneself, to know what one knows, to reflect upon it and to base judgements on it (Baxter Magolda, 2004). It can be conceived across three levels: epistemological, concerning the nature

and certainty of knowledge; intra-personal, concerning an individual's sense of who they are and what they believe; and inter-personal, concerning the construction of relationships. Self-authorship develops skills of critical analysis and evaluation, development of mature working relationships, embracing and valuing of diversity and consideration of multiple perspectives. Students move towards self-authorship when they are able to balance their understanding of the contextual and partial nature of their knowledge with personally grounded goals, beliefs and values, defined by relating to others.

Undergraduate students are more likely to develop self-authorship when faculty (academics) offer sufficiently novel spaces and encounters that compel their students to consider new conceptions of self and personally-referenced ways of knowing (Baxter Magolda, 2004). This argues for the creation of learning spaces where students are challenged to become '*border crossers*', moving them beyond the familiar pedagogic contexts of their undergraduate experience to situate them in new, and hence, more challenging spaces. Such spaces can be created at the heart of the curriculum or in the less formal, co-curricular spaces in between. The transition into the borderland may involve entry into a novel learning space, such as a virtual world, or through adopting an unfamiliar pedagogy in a familiar space, such as student-led seminars, field activities, laboratory and studio work (there are many examples throughout this book, for example in chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 11).

### **Defining the borderland**

The borderland is a metaphor for the condition of living between spaces and cultural norms, existing in the interstices between traditional arenas and/or practices of pedagogy (Elenes, 1997). In higher education these spaces can be defined as unfamiliar physical or metaphorical territories whose novelty and ambiguity offer a challenge, which seems daunting to students and faculty. As such, borderland spaces are liminal, foregrounding a sense of becoming and ambiguity (Turner, 1974). When entering a liminal space, participants become '*neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification*' (Turner, 1974: 232). Expected norms are disrupted so transitions will not be easy. Initial discomfort and uncertainty is to be expected in both faculty and students as they move into these 'messy' spaces (Felten, 2011). Students can feel confused by emerging re-formulations in their ways of knowing, doing, practising and being, causing them to avoid or postpone entry into these spaces (Savin-Baden,

2008). However, crossing a threshold into the borderland permits new and previously inaccessible ways of thinking and practising (Meyer and Land, 2006) and it can promote the evolution of identity from a singular point of reference to something more expansive (Beech, 2011). This makes borderland spaces potentially transformative (Mezirow, 2000). There may be a reformulation of the learner's frame of meaning; prevailing views are discarded and alternative forms of personal understanding are accepted (Land et al, 2014).

Generally, these spaces destabilise traditional academic power hierarchies (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992; Kincheloe, 2004). Students work with peers and faculty, and draw more freely on their own experiences, which prompts the construction of new identities (Giroux, 1992). The division between teaching and learning becomes blurred as students adopt the role of tutor and tutors become facilitators, learning from and with their students. Borderland spaces are fluid and un-prescribed, remaining open to being shaped by the processes of learning experienced by their participants. They act against the essentialism of educational identities, encouraging hybrid forms of teacher-student and student-teacher, each gaining a greater understanding of themselves and each other.

Importantly, the permissive spaces of the borderland allow genuine dialogue to take place, offering opportunities for co-inquiry and reflection amongst students and between students and faculty (Lodge, 2005). In such spaces, students can be empowered to participate in their learning so that they might actively shape their own learning experiences and possibly those of succeeding cohorts. Borderland spaces can therefore be viewed as '*contact zones*' for creative possibility (Askins and Pain, 2011), with perhaps the most important result for students being a movement towards self-authorship.

Table 2.1 highlights ways in which physical and virtual spaces might be used by faculty and students as borderland spaces for learning. Learning spaces are not automatically borderland spaces – they have to be used as such ontologically, epistemologically and practically. Encouraging students to take on new roles and identities can transform traditional spaces into borderland learning locations.

Table 2.1: Higher education spaces and their potential borderland roles (Adapted from Hill et al, 2016)

<b>Physical - Euclidean spaces</b>	<b>Traditional use</b>	<b>Example use as borderland space</b>
Lecture theatres, seminar rooms, classrooms	Transmissive faculty-led presentations, seminars and workshops	Flipped classroom - student-led break-out discussion/critique; use of collaborative technology (e.g. clickers, smart devices); student-led, faculty-facilitated collaborative debate and critique; group role play and other experiential learning
Laboratories and studios	Directed experiments and exercises, performance, dance; faculty demonstrate equipment/techniques	Student-directed/informed experiments, productions, dance, theatre, exercises and small group explorations
Libraries, resources rooms	Faculty directed study	Collaborative, dialogic self-directed meaning-making; student research-led reading and learning
Field, campus spaces	Faculty-led tours; small group inquiries and exercises following stipulated techniques	Students generate new knowledge through research (using relevant technologies); student field presentations and interpretations
Transit spaces: cars, trains and buses	Directed reading and thinking; informal conversations	Individual and small-group sharing and reflection; group learning via smart devices
Communal campus spaces: auditoria, corridors, refectories, student accommodation	Directed reading, watching audio and video podcasts; informal conversations	'Think stops' for peer sharing and group learning face-to-face and via smart devices
Exhibition and conference spaces	Transmissive presentation of faculty directed student materials	Faculty-student-employer multi-way dialogue enabling critical interaction with student research; networking
Classroom and corridor walls	Passive displays of materials	Interactive critique of materials
Collaboratories: pods for break-out sessions	Faculty-initiated group inquiries	Student-led problem-solving and critical reflection via dialogue
Faculty offices	Formal tutorials; faculty-led feedback	Formative discussions between faculty and students, directed by the latter
Peer mentoring spaces (PAL)	Revision of faculty-delivered material by PAL leader	Student-led participative inquiry and shared meaning- and identity-making

Off-campus informal spaces: coffee bars, cafes, student accommodation, libraries, museums, galleries, parks, theatres, malls	Directed personal reading and watching audio and video podcasts; performances; informal conversations	'Think stops' for peer sharing; small group exploration and discovery
<b><i>Virtual – Non-Euclidean spaces</i></b>	<b>Traditional use</b>	<b>Example use as borderland space</b>
Virtual Learning Environments: synchronous (chatrooms, virtual worlds) or asynchronous (discussion boards, blogs, wikis, emails)	Faculty communicating with individual students and student groups; resource repositories	Peer production of knowledge, resources and meaning; peer questioning and answering in class/field/studio/immersive environment; peer assessment
Online undergraduate research journals	Student reading and authorship	Student video reflections on personal research; reflective blogs
Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram)	Faculty communicating with students and student groups	Two way iterative developmental dialogue between faculty-students and students-students
Personal (head) space	Thinking within comfort zone	Thinking 'outside of the box'

## Engaging students in a borderland conference space

### Case study context

Undergraduate research conferences are growing in number at institutional, national and international levels (Walkington et al, 2017); the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) started in the USA in 1986 and the UK British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) was initiated in 2010. We use BCUR as a national multi-disciplinary undergraduate research conference to explore the opportunities, benefits and challenges of engaging students in borderland spaces in higher education. This space, and the pedagogic practices it allows, intersects with both learner and teacher identities at intra- and inter-personal levels, highlighting the fundamental role of space as a representational medium (Sagan, 2011). In our case study students are travelling to another, unfamiliar campus to present their research to a wholly unknown audience. The borderland space is physical in terms of campus setting, and virtual in challenging personal thinking. The situation is outside the comfort zone of the 'expected' higher education experience, providing disruption and challenge, and promoting deeper, more engaged learning.

### Case study methodology

Between 2012 and 2014, the authors undertook 90 interviews with students who presented a poster or paper at three BCUR conferences, thereby capturing views from 14% of the participants. Respondents were drawn from all undergraduate disciplines (STEM, social sciences, medicine and allied health disciplines, law, arts and humanities). These interviews, averaging 30 minutes in length, focused on the students' experiences of preparing for the conference, presenting their paper or poster and being a conference participant. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and entered into the data analysis software NVivo to assist coding based on interpretive readings of the responses. The use of double blind coding was employed to reduce bias. This constructivist grounded theory enabled salient themes to surface from data during the analytical process. The majority of respondents were final-year students presenting their dissertation, summer research project or independent research (Kneale et al, 2016; Walkington et al, 2017).

### **Conference findings**

The analysis demonstrated that the physical space of the conference was fundamental in shaping the learning experiences of the participants. Students perceived the conference space as clearly distinct from their own campus space, offering different educational experiences. The conference space was often described as transitional, helping students to develop their academic journey:

*'Coming here I see as a stepping stone ... this is practice for the next step and I'm constantly trying to build and develop myself'*

For many students, the public context represented a shift to a more authentic 'real-world' environment compared with the classroom, allowing some to glimpse their future:

*'It's a taste of what my professional life could be like'*

*'In regards to furthering my own career and my own ambitions, I suddenly realised they're much more attainable than I thought they were'*

As students moved into the borderland conference space, with its intrinsic novelty and challenge, they expressed feelings of apprehension. They frequently spoke of being pushed beyond their 'comfort zone', articulating feelings of vulnerability, mediated by a consensus that persisting in this space gradually dissolved their concerns, due to the safe and nurturing environment:

*'In the beginning I was really nervous, I didn't want to talk, but people come up to you and ask you questions, they make comments and then you relax and want more of it'*

The students described how they had thought critically about their research, re-purposing it to suit the multi-disciplinary context. Notably, they selected and prioritised material to convey their core messages in a manner that would be comprehensible to a diverse audience. The students detailed how they made conscious decisions about the content to include or omit in the process of summarising their research projects:

*'A ten minute presentation forced you to look much more closely at what's necessary for the argument ... you learn to define what's important about your work'*

The authenticity of the conference space promoted intellectual autonomy in the participating students. The majority carefully self-regulated their preparations to ensure they were ready to present their work to an external audience. Before the conference they rehearsed in front of peers and tutors, sought feedback, and subsequently improved their presentations:

*'I sent my poster to my friends and my family who know little about what I do. I said 'Do you understand this? Is there anything in there that the average person would not get?' They gave me advice and I interpreted it'*

This self-review process continued throughout the conference as the students benchmarked themselves against their peers. Situating themselves against others, the students considered how to take forward the best aspects of what they had witnessed to strengthen their own performances:

*'I listened to what the other papers were about, got tips, worked out how they were presenting it and then went home and re-evaluated my presentation'*

The relationships between faculty and students were perceived very differently to those in their home institutions. During the interviews, students often gestured with their hands that faculty were positioned higher than students, but they noted that the conference made this relationship more equal. Hierarchies were accordingly broken down in this borderland, which was empowering:

*'At university there always seems to be that student- teacher barrier ... at something like this you feel more on a par with people and you can just discuss things'*

Encounters between students and reciprocal dialogue were important in the conference space. The poster presentations, in particular, provided discursive spaces that encouraged students to negotiate their thoughts with one another, engaging them in 'deeper' critical thinking:

*'Difficult questions move you forward ... If you're thinking for yourself you just continue to strike forward in a line, but if someone stops you and asks you What's going on here? Then you ask yourself and you improve'*

*'The way I learn best or when I think I understand something is when people come and ask me lots of questions about it and then I have to re-explain it'*

These conversations were points of contact where individuals offered multiple perspectives from equal power positions. The students shared agency, speaking for themselves about their own and one another's research. These conversations sometimes unsettled the presenters as their existing viewpoints were challenged, but they came to realise that there was not just one story of, or understanding derived from, their research (Wahlström, 2010). These conversational negotiations helped the students to cross a threshold of understanding and to deepen their comprehension about the construction, nature and utility of their knowledge (Land et al, 2014):

*'I'm quite aware that my perspective may not match other people's perspectives, and so the more perspectives I can get, the more robust, grounded and relevant the argument becomes'*

Students described how they began to understand that knowledge is partial, continually created and re-created in response to new research, ideas and perspectives from a range of disciplines. The students also reported their ability to see synoptically and to make connections across disciplines, and they perceived themselves as having agency in this process through disseminating their research:

*'Speaking to people in other disciplines, seeing the kind of parallels, what you're doing is actually just a subset of a higher scientific framework. That brings a more holistic approach to research'*

Presenting research in the egalitarian BCUR spaces reconfigured the grounds on which knowledge was legitimated, away from expert tutors who were benchmarking students against



assessment criteria to award a grade. Here, there was engagement with audiences of peers who were genuinely interested in learning from their fellow students:

*'When you're taking your research to a conference it's more tied in with yourself ... people are going to judge me ... as a person, as a researcher, as someone who's trying to be a scientist'*

The students described a strong sense of ownership of their research; what they created from it, whether a poster or verbal paper, mattered to them beyond tutor-assigned assessment criteria. They benchmarked themselves against an exposition of self and self-directed research appropriate to a diverse audience. They constructed personal values, balancing the alternative perspectives of others as co-ordinating referents, demonstrating the developmental maturity of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004). The conference thereby became a space for experimentation and creative expression:

*'The BCUR experience has been a greater learning experience than anything I've had on the course because it's something that comes from you ... you get a feeling of satisfaction when you create something from scratch'*

The conference offered a liminal space, beyond the cultural norms of the classroom, in which students experienced a process of becoming (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011; Todd, 2014; Kneale et al, 2016). They repositioned themselves in an unfamiliar role as research disseminator and they began to emerge as nascent authors of their own lives:

*'I feel like a mini professional, it's really strange, not feeling like a student'*

*'You can become who you want to be, rather than what you think a piece of paper says you should be'*

Some respondents anticipated an oscillation between their old and new identities. They talked of developing a new identity at the conference, but they expected to lose it once they stepped back into the classroom:

*'You do get into the mindset of being a researcher rather than a student, but I'm not sure this will last when I go back to my classes. Will I revert to simply being a student again?'*

Some students clearly perceived their emerging identities to be slippery and dependent upon returning to the pedagogic conditions offered by borderland spaces in future.

### **Borderland spaces and self-authorship: reflections**

This study revealed benefits from engaging students in teaching and learning partnerships in borderland space, challenging understanding, identities and perspectives. The novelty of entering the unfamiliar and challenging borderland resulted in antithetical feelings for students at the start; they recognised anxiety mixed with excitement as they moved beyond their comfort zones. However, as they became accustomed to the space and embraced its liminality (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011), they gained confidence in their new roles and began to embrace new responsibilities. The conference offered a space of opportunity where participants, from a multitude of disciplines and through interactions with one another, were able to cast off the fixed identity of 'student' to become nascent research professionals. This was a future-facing, authentic 'space of practice', where students implemented the taught, and the learned, and re-framed themselves. They demonstrated enthusiasm for, and increased confidence in, accepting agency in learning. In the borderland conference space learning was shared and generative. Through a process of reciprocal elucidation (Foucault, 1984) students mutually interrogated and co-created understanding across disciplines. They developed a form of conference 'citizenship', a sense of belonging professionally and legitimately in that space (Walkington et al, 2017).

Entering the borderland, and persisting in it, can be transformative, as students acquire new frames of meaning and facets to their identity (Land et al, 2014). They mature into multi-dimensional individuals as they experience learning from a novel vantage point. The students at the conference demonstrated adaptability to their surroundings, to this new space, becoming self-aware and engaging meaningfully in their learning. They reported becoming receptive to alternative viewpoints, and exercised critical thinking and reflective judgement. These are facets of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Some students crossed conceptual thresholds (Meyer and Land, 2006), opening up previously inaccessible ways of thinking, knowing and doing. They progressed beyond 'bare pedagogy' (Giroux, 2010) to engage with aspects of critical pedagogy. Visiting borderland spaces at a number of points during their learning journey can allow students to engage further with, and progress beyond, their disciplinary identities, to express complex and intersecting personalities, and to trust their judgement in order to make informed decisions.

The study also identified challenges with respect to teaching and learning in the borderland. The conference students felt anxious and vulnerable as they entered the space, taking on new roles and adopting an ethos of socially constructed pedagogy. Partnership between student peers, and between students and faculty, can mean letting go of familiar ways of learning, requiring trust in a process that is inherently unpredictable (Healey et al, 2014). As such, borderland spaces are inherently risky. Students and tutors adjusted to accommodate the altered identities and reciprocal dialogic pedagogies they found; this adjustment is fundamental to enabling such spaces and practices to thrive effectively. Tutors leave behind the security of the lectern and transmission-based pedagogies, becoming more personally involved in their students' learning. This includes candid conversations about what students expect from them and it demands significant investments of time, which will probably not appear in workload models. Students, with their identities in flux as they move between borderland spaces and more traditional education spaces, can feel confused about their role and behaviour (how they should act) with different tutors across a variety of learning contexts. Support for these transitions requires receptive academic and professional staff (Johansson and Felten, 2014).

Borderland spaces are also emotional spaces for students and faculty. As a consequence, appropriate, and contextually-specific, guidance and training should be available, so that both parties can develop their knowledge and skills to ensure successful navigation into, and out of, these challenging environments. There is a responsibility for faculty to encourage and support inclusivity in such spaces, particularly for those lacking confidence and cultural capital (Felten et al, 2013). Adoption of this responsibility needs to be genuine. Minimal support for student engagement could lead to students feeling disillusioned and alienated (Mann, 2001), and could reinforce existing power hierarchies (Robinson, 2012). Disruption and borderland activity should promote individual agency in real terms, moving students away from a homogenised academic experience (Sabri, 2011).

The messy spaces of the borderlands generate issues that are difficult to resolve for all concerned and this has implications for any conclusions about their effectiveness. There needs to be consideration of actively promoting the 'disruption' generated by the movement of

students and faculty into and out of borderland spaces through strategies and policies. In an era of accountability, we argue for productive disruption in our embodied spaces of learning, offering fluidity and connection between the formal curriculum and the more flexible co-curriculum. Care needs to be taken in evaluation style and timing. If student views are sought during the initial unsettling experiences that occur within borderland spaces, when cognitive dissonance precedes sense making, there is likely to be negative feedback.

If the greatest impact on learning occurs in these boundary-crossing, integrative and socially embedded experiences, then we need to create these experiences through effective learning design. There should be adequate supporting infrastructure, promotion of co-creative approaches in academic development fora, and personal development opportunities and recognition for students and faculty to engage successfully in borderland spaces. There are many opportunities to encourage effective and inclusive learning experiences in the potentially transformative spaces of the borderland, but they need careful and creative thinking, planning and action.

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