Jan Nespor - Comments for Plenary session, Ethnography & Education Research Forum, University of Pennyslvania. Philadelphia, February 25, 2006. Please don't quote or cite without permission.[1]

Classrooms and Extended Networks of Schooling

If everyone in a culture thinks that situation X is a problem, it is likely the case that (1) the problem that must be confronted lies elsewhere, and (2) the formulation that situation X is the problem, by keeping the focus on situation X, is in fact part of the problem (McDermott & Varenne, 1996, p. 114)

At the conference on "What in the World Happens in Classrooms?" that she, Antonia Candela, and Cesar Col helped organize a few years back Elsie Rockwell described classrooms as the "center of schooling," an image at once familiar and problematic: there are, after all, different kinds of centers, from cherry pits to doughnut holes. On the one hand, many researchers – and policy-makers in the U.S. government – adopt what could be called an "internalist" perspective, in which the classroom is treated as a bounded container of teaching and learning – it's a center in the sense that the important things are endogenously generated there and then transferred or moved outwards. This view has its uses, but criticisms of it have a long history (e.g., Stubbs & Delamont, 1976; Barton & Meighan, 1978) and point to the articulations of classrooms with activity systems outside the school – from social class and ethnicity to popular culture. In the research attentive to these issues the classroom sometimes loses its privileged position altogether, but where it remains a "center" it's usually conceived as something like a knot or a crossroads, or to borrow a phrase from the geographer Doreen Massey, an "articulated moment in networks of social relations and understandings" "constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself" (Massey, 1993, p. 66). Following Massey we can call these "global" accounts of the classroom. If internalist accounts treat the classroom as self-contained and operating according to internal rhythms and discourse structures, global accounts treat it more like some sort of interactional vortex into which cultural practices, individual beliefs, economic forces, gender and class relations, ethnic identities, participants' "ways with words," popular culture engagements, and so on are sucked and *at that moment* transformed into educational effects. In the former what's defined as outside the classroom can be analytically ignored, in the latter it's considered insofar as

[1] Thanks to Elsie and Antonia for inviting me into their plenary session. Thanks to the audience at the Forum for listening politely.

it's visible in or can be inferred from observable classroom events. In one case the standpoint is that of residents in a stable environment – 'community' members in a classroom 'culture' – in the other the standpoint is that of actors stationed in a crossroads through which all sorts of processes are percolating.

What's left out of both approaches are the standpoints of travelers moving through classrooms within and across years. Instead, research proceeds as if classrooms are stable within the year and fitted together seamlessly across years (Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990, 178-9). Stability and continuity are empirical questions, of course, but it's clear that in many systems, schools and classrooms are fluid and unstable (see Family Housing Fund, 1998; Kerbow, 1996; Temple & Reynolds, 1999; Keeler & McCall, 1972; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Ream, 2003; General Accounting Office, 1994; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990). In addition to the organized movement of pupils from one school year to the next or from one subject to another within the day – not simple matters to make sense of from a student's standpoint at all -- and even without taking into account things like pull-out programs which shuttle kids around across the day, a significant proportion of students move in and out of schools within a single year. As in Kerbow's (1996) study of mobility in Chicago elementary schools, the result can be that schools from one year to the next "are no longer the same organization. They have the same physical building and the same grade-level structure, but their most essential feature — the students — has almost completely changed" (p. 1). The observation only gains force when the high mobility of teachers in such schools is also considered (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Denson, 2004). From the standpoint of the moving student (or the relatively stable student around whom teachers and peers are moving) schooling is a patchwork of differing practices that become increasingly discontinuous and incongruent the farther and faster students move.

If it's at least plausible that classrooms look different from the standpoint of the traveler – the mobile pupil (or teacher) viewed over time -- how should we conceptualize that time? This is as much a political as a theoretical (e.g., Lemke, 2000) question. Whether we look at pupils and teachers only in the official administrative clock-time of the class session, or link things observed during classes to what teachers and pupils are doing at home or after school that year, or connect what's happening in and out of the class that year to what happened in previous years (and then trace it into the years that follow) depends on and has implications for how we think about the administration and control of schools, how we understand and evaluate their practices and effects.

It's about power. As Munn (1992) points out, the media we use in producing temporalities – calenders, schedules, clocks, etc. – play key roles in:

> the construction of cultural governance through reaching into the body time of persons and coordinating it with values embedded in the "world time" of a wider constructed universe of power. . . . people are ongoingly articulated through this temporalization into a wider politico-cosmic order, a world time of particular values and powers. (pp. 109, 111).

It's problematic, then, that the basic temporal framework of most classroom (and school) studies, internalist or global, is the class-year – the grade- or test-score-punctuated output of individual and aggregate students within a bounded class across a year's time – a construct which fits nicely with the "politico-cosmic order" of centralized, state-sponsored test regimes.[2] Why is it problematic? For one thing, everyday relations organized across classrooms and extending beyond the year become hard to see. How something like a brief stretch of classroom interaction is linked to another segment in the same class the next day, let alone a few months later, is difficult enough to analyze. It's relation to something that happens to the student in another class that day or a year or two later remains very poorly understood. We can note similarities or parallels between separated instances and claim they reflect or are produced by some "hidden abstract object" (culture, class, D/discourse, capitalism, etc., see Lynch 1995), but the specific mechanisms that connect them and shape their meanings for students are unclear. On what basis do we assume that a pupil's position in some observed classroom event is continuous or reproduced across grade levels and schools, or that class, gender, linguistic, or race-based inequalities viewed in one classroom exchange extrapolate into long-term inequalities? For mobile students, how do we even describe variable itineraries over long time periods? If schooling is "path dependent" (e.g., David, 2000) in the sense that "the order in which things happen affects how they happen" (Tilly, 2002, p. 76), how do we deal with the fact that two students who arrive at the same classroom along different paths are not in the same classroom for many purposes? The events in which they interact with each other are not the same

---

[2] Of course many classroom researchers break the class up into much finer temporal structures, distinguish between *kairos* and *chronos*, between capitalist clock time and phenomenologically-experienced time, look at polychronic organizations of class activity, and so forth – but presupposing these analyses is a classroom that gets "cut" (Strathern, 1996) or punctuated (Callon, 1991) at the year's end or at some other administratively defined boundary. This is the pre-supposed time frame of the more intricate analyses.

events. For children and parents schools, classrooms, pedagogy, and subject matters are not just class-year entities but also stretched-out networks of places, people, and events which not only change unpredictably across years, but can change during the day, and change radically within the year as students move. Both classrooms in high mobility situations and the class-year generally as a unit of activity are "synoptic illusions" (Bourdieu, 1977) produced by institutional accounting practices.

What would it mean to we talk about classrooms as multiple, contingently related and relationally-constituted "centers' organized over longer periods than the academic year? Consider this exchange between the school-reformer Deborah Meier and Washington Post education reporter Jay Mathews. Mathews is defending centralized, high-stakes testing

Mathews: Competent reading, writing and arithmetic is enough for me. . . . we average Americans with limited imaginations need something simple to measure, and the ability to read efficiently, write clearly and do math through algebra works for me. If you go beyond that, without a measuring method that people understand, you leave yourself open to doubt about what you are teaching and '60s-bashing and other unhelpful nonsense.

Meier: . . . You want a measure that everyone can understand? Here's one: the number of kids who graduate from high school versus the number who start, the number who go on to college compared to a comparable peer group. (Meier, in Mathews, 2004)

Meier's "measure" takes the perspective of the school, and by "start" she may have meant the "start" of high school. But her comment raises the question of how we think in terms beyond the standard, class-year space-time unit of educational research. Imagine she means "start" at grade-one or pre-school, and that what's at stake is not an account of a single school's performance but of the network of classrooms and schools through which students trace academic careers over the intervening years. How do you look at classrooms if you think of them not as a base of practice (as they must seem from a teacher standpoint) but as points that lots of people are moving through along various itineraries at different rhythms?

One way is to attend to the structures, mechanisms, and artifacts that stabilize activity and allow it to be moved across the span of the class-year. By structures I mean things like the relatively stabilized, cross-year trajectories that are laid out in advance for pupils – cumulative sequences of

organizationally accountable experiences (courses, identities, internships, etc. organized as vacancy or recruitment chains) that confer membership by credential in some institutionally-consecrated or socially-typified category of person. We know a good bit about some of these trajectories, or at least parts of them, from studies of things like tracking systems, gatekeeping processes, and activities like sports, gangs, band, and work. However, with the possible exception of a small class of events (e.g., those that define a child as mentally retarded or lead to expulsion from school) we don't have a good sense of the differences that differentiating discourses and events make over the long term. To work that out we would need to look at how events function as "turning points" (Hughes, 1968; Abbott, 2001) that enroll pupils in certain trajectories, or destabilize past enrollments, or shift pupils from one trajectory to another, or articulate successive trajectories, or layer one atop another, and so on. Since in most cases it would not be single events but patterns of events over indeterminate stretches of time and space that constituted turning points, a key question would be how these concatenate and matter in the context of different sorts of paths.[3] We would have to ask how the timing, pacing, and positioning of events along the career trajectory shape it. A similar event involving pupils moving along different kinds of paths might have very different implications depending on how the event is sustained, extended, made to last. Attending to such questions would mean that classroom analysts would have to look also at the processes that determine which students end up in which classrooms for how long along what paths – things like housing policies, labor markets, zoning decisions, social service provision, and the like, which are constitutive of schooling not only through their influence on the social networks and resources children bring to schools, but also by shaping the composition and stability of classrooms.

A focus beyond the class-year would put renewed attention on everything in classroom life that moves and leaves a trace. Given the popularity of socio-cultural approaches to teaching and learning and the centrality of artifacts and concepts of mediation in such approaches, relatively little

---

[3] The approach advocated here might complement work such as that of Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (2000) which traces academic (and post-academic) careers in terms of individual actor's "pragmatic rationality," their decision-making across "imagined futures," "practical anticipations," networks of advice-giving, and workplace and educational experiences. Against its many virtues, this work tends to ignore organizational mechanisms – in fact, schools and classrooms – and ultimately rests on a kind of methodological individualism – partly an artifact of a reliance on interview methods, the latter also restricting the work to young adults – "post-16" – and largely ignoring pathways and movement prior to that.

attention has been given to the ways that students and teachers construct, collect, or modify artifacts and use them across classes and across years. But are not many of the key activities young people engage in – popular culture, music, sports, fashion – organized around selected or self-produced artifacts that preserve the activity or make it easier to move? Yet even artifacts as basic to formal schooling as pupil records and grades are under-studied – and when addressed at all, are generally recast as "assessment" issues rather than ways of moving student identities and extending them in time. How do teachers stabilize pedagogy in texts and other materials? How do these move from year to year, how are they related to artifacts used by teachers at other levels? How do students represent subjects, pedagogies, teachers, and schools in artifacts? How long do these artifacts last and how do they move? Do (or could) students produce artifacts (by themselves or with jointly with teachers) or use others' artifacts to trace connections across time and activities?

Perhaps the answer to the last question seems an obvious "no" if you're thinking of pre-schoolers, but at some point this changes. By post-secondary education school environments are saturated with student-produced, cross-course or cross-year artifacts. Some are individual (notes) but college students also collect each others' work, stock-pile and hoard notes, papers, and tests, and organize their allocation across social networks.

Student records and artifacts are obviously just examples of mechanisms for organizing cross-year relations. My more general point is that it's too easy to focus on stretches of time instructionally meaningful to the teacher (or at least made meaningful to teachers by administrative pressures) rather than the temporal structure of the student's path. The latter, especially for highly mobile students, may produce event networks that do not look anything like what we think of as "classrooms," and cross-year paths that do not map onto any school.

References

Abbott, A. (2001). On the concept of turning point. In A.Abbott, Time matters (pp. 240-260). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ball, S. Maguire, M. and Macrea, S. (2000). Choices, pathways, and transitions post-16. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Barton & Meighan, 1978;

Callon, M. (1986). Some elements of a sociology of translation: Domestication of the scallops and the fishermen, in J. Law (Ed.), Power, action and belief: A new sociology of knowledge? (pp. 196-229). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Callon, M. (1991). Techno-economic networks and irreversibility. In J. Law (Ed.) A sociology of monsters: Essays on power, technology and domination (pp. 132-161). London & New York: Routledge.

Cicourel, A. (1981). Notes on the integration of micro- and macro-levels of analysis. In K. Knorr-Cetina and A. Cicourel (Eds.), Advances in social theory and methodology: Towards an integration of micro- and macro-sociologies (pp. 51-80). Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

David, P. (2000). Path dependence, its critics and the quest for 'historical economics'. http://www-econ.stanford.edu/faculty/workp/swp00011.pdf Accessed January 28, 2004.

Family Housing Fund. (1998). Kids Mobility Project www.fhfund.org/educational_materials_reports.asp

General Accounting Office (1994). Elementary school children: Many change schools frequently, harming their education. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Hutchins, E. (1995). Cognition in the wild. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Keeler, E. and McCall, J. (1972). Simultaneous estimation of teacher mobility and reading scores. ERIC document No. ED075358.

Kerbow, D. (1996). Patterns of urban student mobility and local school reform. Rept. No. 5. Center for Research on the Eduation of Students Placed at Risk.

Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2002). Teaching sorting and the plight of urban schools. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 24, 37-62

Lash, A.A. & Kirkpatrick, S.L. (1990). A classroom perspective of student mobility. Elementary School Journal, 91, 177-91.

Lemke, J. (2000). Across the scales of time. Mind, Culture, & Activity, 7(4): 273-290.

Lynch, M. (1995). The idylls of the academy. Social Studies of Science, 25, 582-600.

McDermott, R. and Varenne, H. (1996)

Massey, D. (1993). Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place. In J. Bird et al (Eds.) Mapping the futures (pp. 59-69). London & New York: Routledge.

Massey, D. (1999). Power-geometries and the politics of space-time. Heidelberg, Germany: Department of Geography, University of Heidelberg.

Mathews, J. (February 17, 2004) Seeking Alternatives to Standardized Testing [Interview with Deborah Meier]. The Washington Post, Accessed at http://www.washingtonpost.com/ on February 17, 2004.

Munn, N. (1992). The cultural anthropology of time: A critical essay. Annual Review of Anthropology, 21, 93-123.

Pierson, (2003). Big, slow-moving, and . . .invisible. In J. Mahoney and D. Rueschemeyer (Eds.) Comparative historical analysis in the social sciences (pp. 177-207). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ream, R. (2003). Counterfeit social capital and Mexican American underachievement. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 25, 237-262.

Rumberger, 2003;

Stubbs, M. and Delamont, S. (Eds.) (1976). Explorations in classroom observation. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons

Strathern, M. (1996). Cutting the network. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 2, pp. 517-535.

Temple,J. & Reynolds, A. (1999). School mobility and achievement: Longitudinal findings from an urban cohort. Journal of School Psychology, 37, 355-377.

Thelen, 2003

Tilly, C. (2002). Stories, identities, and political change. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.