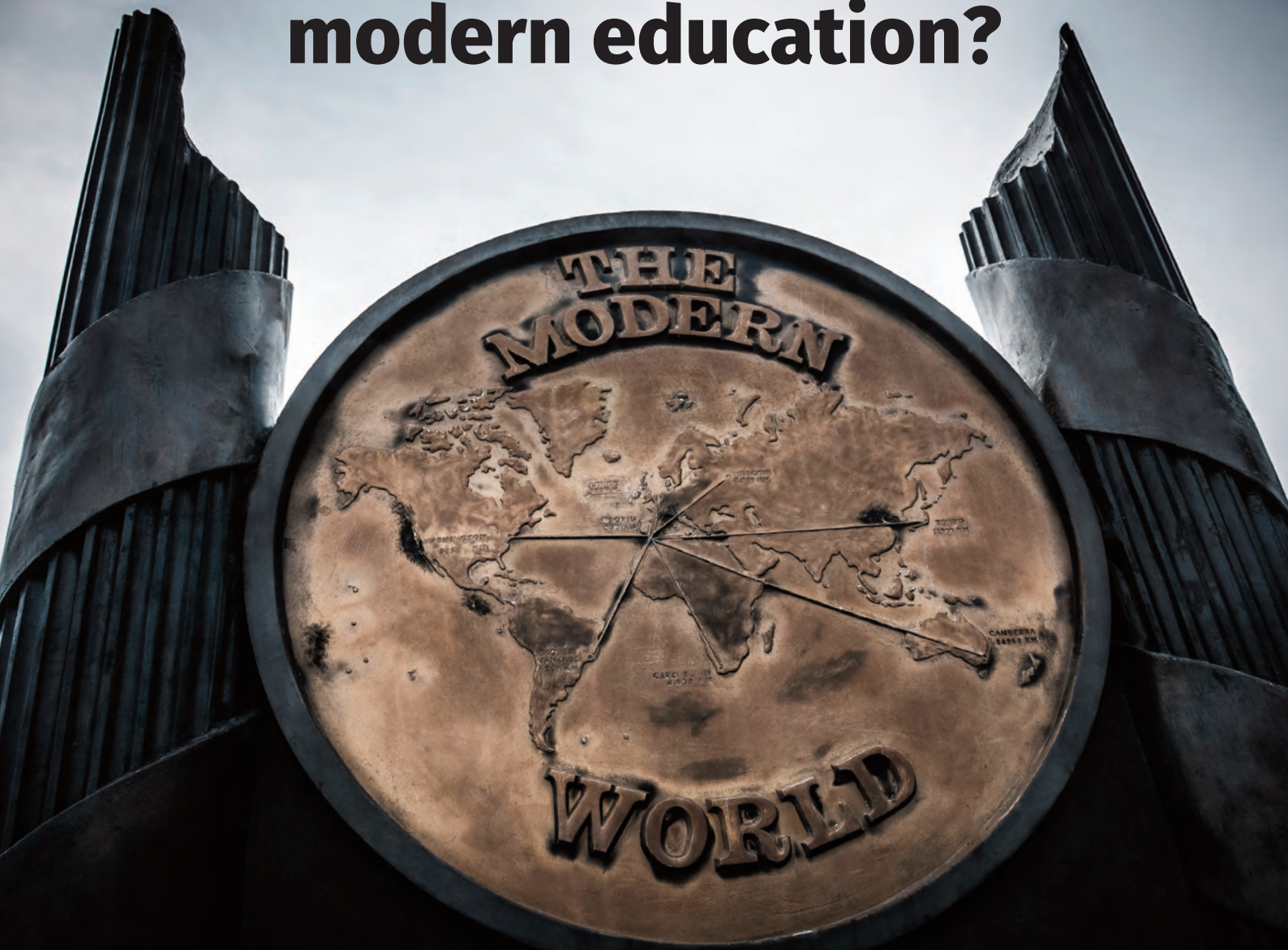


Plus Ultra:
**What's this got to do with
modern education?**



Plus Ultra: What's this got to do with modern education?

Dr Kevin J Flint
International Association for Practice Doctorates

Over the last few months my articles presented on the Adjacent Government website have been variously concerned with the complex relationship of practice, research and education. Here I wish to concentrate upon education. In reading a multiplicity of historical accounts of it one cannot help but be struck by just how easy it has become to be blinded by the possibility that as a form of *educere*, education is somehow, variously and egregiously opening radically new space; imprisoned within the rhetoric of education that always appears to hold the possibility of leading us out into profound new understandings of the world. It is striking, too, just how difficult it is to find substantive understandings of what may be signified by the use of the term 'human being', referring to the practices of the individual/collective body of humanity that is supposedly becoming more educated in some way.

Indeed, in economic terms almost all formal understandings of *what is given* in the name of practices of education are constituted within particular ethical, and in some cases, aesthetic, framings of just how practices should fit together in order to give them meaning. In this context along with the purpose of developing the argument that follows, of particular salience is the *equipment* used in order to carry out such a task – namely the signs

used in this opening paragraph – it is assumed that each of the signifiers used has a metaphysical connection with things, entities, events... in the world of practice. But surely even the most cursory examination of the history [however this term may be understood] of practices around the globe over any specified period of time cannot fail to uncover that people everywhere are working in so many different ways to overcome their own perceptions of the delimitations constituted by any such metaphysical determinations of the world. Moreover, in the spirit of being 'deconstructive', as Gert J.J. Biesta [2013] has suggested, in his thought-provoking exploration of *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, which makes plain the distinction between the gathering force of the 'is', with its power to lock everything into the present, and the ethical/economic event of practices of education, one is also struck by the absence of any consideration given to the space produced by either such ontology or the life unfolding in any such event.

Let us return in being deconstructive with any metaphysical determination of space a little later. According to Henri Lefebvre we all *produce social* space in our writings, in our social interactions, in our lives and events in the world of everyday practice. Such space variously opens a spectrum

of possibilities, including the possibility of delimiting our practices. Here Michel Foucault's thesis in *Discipline and Punish* springs to mind, where the active subject is always already subject to disciplinary training made plain in a number of tropes; not least the figure of the soldier, the metaphor of the shepherd-flock along with the emerging allegories of performativity cultivated in and by professionalizing agendas in the name of education over the last thirty years. In this way the architectural spaces produced by and in the various languages of education each cultivate their own aesthetics, so opening further deconstructive readings of John Dewey's aesthetic take on *The Art of Experience* in terms of 'doing' and 'undergoing' what is done in practice.

Let us reflect further upon the notion of 'fit' introduced earlier, which was taken from Charles Spinoza, Fernando Flores and Hubert Dreyfus's [1997] illuminating examination of 'entrepreneurship, democratic action and the cultivation of solidarity', which they call *Disclosing New Worlds*. One notes in passing, in the context of the emergence of many dominant forms of neo-liberalism, the very significant challenge of ever producing social solidarity. At issue with any such 'fit' into practice, is the world in which the body is ensnared. We all live in a world. John Richardson neatly captures how a world functions in two memorable phrases: 'the world is the web of routes we know our way along'; 'it is the system of ways we know how to handle things'.

I wish to argue that the architecture of space produced in the everyday iterations of the practices of the languages of education deserves to be more thoroughly

researched and critically examined: not in order to follow any further repetitions and re-iterations of the sublime numbers of docile bodies who have remained [at least implicitly] with metaphysical determinations of the world of practice. Not even in expanding or enlarging insights concerned with many different worlds of practice found in the name of education. At issue in moving towards architectures for human beings there remains the life giving event [*événement*] of education as distinct from its ontological determination resulting from the gathering powers and naming force of being as presence found in every nominalization and every verb in our lexicon. In order to bring together the many different dimensions of the practice of education I suggest that architecture provides an appropriate medium which itself opens space for challenging further rethinking of education, in the spirit of Gert Biesta's and Michael Peters' work. As the authors of the Stanford Encyclopedia suggest, 'a far-reaching philosophy of architecture extends beyond even a broadly aesthetics-based assessment, to include considerations of ethics, social and political philosophy, and philosophical reflections' not least on the economics, ethics of *what is given* in any practices, and also what is not currently given.

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Flanking the entrance to the Straits of Gibraltar are two promontories that in ancient times were identified as the Pillars of Hercules. According to Renaissance tradition the pillars were inscribed with a warning to sailors, *non plus ultra*—nothing further beyond. Here we should also keep in mind Plato's writings in the *Timeaus* and the *Criteas*,

which made reference to the mythical Island of Atlantis, a realm in the far West that had been sunk beneath the ocean by the gods in order to punish people for their immorality. Being situated beyond the 'Pillars of Hercules', Plato's figure of Atlantis served as a warning to navigators not to venture outside the limits of what was known at the time.

Until the last few years, historically the story accepted by most historians was that in the fifteenth century Christopher Columbus, an Italian explorer, navigator and colonizer, who was a citizen of the Republic of Genoa, in passing through the Pillars of Hercules, completed four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492, 1493, 1498 and 1502. Columbus's voyages, it has been always assumed, had initiated what is now the familiar history of the European colonization of the New World. We should note in passing, too, in being deconstructive, apart from the obvious equipment used to carry out such a task, included also was the use of metaphysical language constituting the economy of what had been given in such an event. His original purpose had been to find a direct water route from Europe to Asia, but he failed on this matter. Instead, quite by accident, he stumbled upon the Americas. It is apparent now to most people that Columbus and his fellow crew have become identified as the first explorers involved in the colonization of the 'New World'.

We should note in passing that what now might be regarded as the architectural space in which both the original colonization occurred and any *possible* historical reading of it have remained *measured, conditional*, consonant with the

homogeneous economy of what is given in such practices.

Historical disclosure and space

It is also helpful to gain a little more clarity regarding the relationship between the space produced from any economy of practice and historical disclosure. Let us join Spinoza and his colleagues again. In deconstructing these authors based upon Lefebvre's writings, it is suggested that such a 'set of practices for dealing with other people, and things', for example, here involved in Columbus's original voyages and their historical narration, produce 'a self-contained web of meanings, within what they term a 'disclosive space'. In reading such practices from Heidegger's writings in *Being and Time*, Spinoza and his colleagues suggest that the worlds of the original voyagers along with any of their historians, has three characteristics. As we have indicated already, they involved inter-related pieces of *equipment*, each used for a particular *purpose*, so giving those involved in such worlds of practices particular *identities* – voyager, explorer, colonizer... along with historian, writer... It is such worlds of practice, of course, that are the seed corn for the cultivation of cultures.

The architectural spaces produced in these cultures are each disclosive of particular economies, that is, of *what is given in practice* in each case. At issue in the use of this terminology, disclosure/disclosive, as Spinoza and his colleagues [1997] suggest, are architectural spaces for human beings where there is an openness experienced by participants. In speaking of disclosive space, which they also note in its express practice, it has the capacity to exclude, they suggest one thinks of the

production of disclosive space 'as opening space that is bounded by a horizon'. In this way the metaphysical architectural space produced delimits human practices to homogeneous economies where the possibilities given in practice are always conditional and calculable. But, unconditionally, the possibilities unfolding in peoples' lives are always incalculable and impossible to identify fully. As human beings we all have the potential to be open unconditionally to the impossible and incalculable dimensions of any practice – that is, to heterogeneous economies, producing their own architectural *spacing*. In spacing – 'the coming space of time and the coming time of space' – we are no longer delimited in any practice by our inventions of time or space.

Let us remain with Spinoza et al.,'s argument. In metaphysical terms we can speak of the style of practice adopted by Columbus and his crews, and by their associated historians. But just what does style signify? In speaking of style Spinoza and his colleagues are careful to distinguish between a common misunderstanding of style as one aspect among many of a human being or human practices, just as one may consider style as one aspect among many of a piece of clothing. I am fully in agreement with their claim that 'style is not one aspect of things, people or activity, but rather it constitutes them as what they are' [ibid:19]. It's the style of Columbus's practices, the style of historians' take on such events that governs how anything in cultures emerging from such practices can show up as anything. In this way style may be understood, Spinoza and his colleagues' [1997] argue, as the ground of meaning in human activity. [ibid: 20]. For these authors, style or the

particular way activities are coordinated 'opens disclosive space in a threefold manner: 1. By coordinating actions; 2. By determining how people and things matter; 3. By being transferred from situation to situation'. In this way Columbus's voyages and the associated historical narrative have come to show up in a particular way and to make sense for us.

What has this all got to do with understandings of historical disclosure? In seeking to address this question it is probably helpful at least to consider the symbolic power of the Pillars of Hercules for the Renaissance. More generally, too, in what follows, with help from Spinoza et al., [1997] we will also come to explore one particular philosophical understanding of history. First we should keep in mind that following Columbus's voyages the work of Sir Francis Bacon, English philosopher, essayist, and scientist of the Renaissance period. He had moved understandings of science, and in particular its methodology beyond the scope of medieval and Aristotelean scholasticism, drawing upon inductive reasoning where generalizations are posited on the basis of individual instances. Herein lay the obsession of many English people with empiricism; the production of generalized scientific theories upon the basis of relatively limited evidence generated from one or more of the five senses.

Indeed, Hercules's pillars are engraved upon the title page of Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* [Great Renewal]. But, his interpretation of them suggests that they now bear the inscription, *plus ultra*, more beyond, with the 'non' having been removed [presumably at the time on the basis of Columbus's voyages, which, while

not finding Atlanta, did result in the discovery by many more Europeans of the Americas]. Bacon's motto, inscribed at the base of his *Novum Organum* [constituting the second part of his *Instaurio Magma*], reads: *Multi pertransibunt et augebitur scientia* – many will pass through and knowledge will be greater.

This return to Bacon is not, however, an attempt to re-connect with empiricism. At issue is Bacon's constitution of a disclosive space that moved beyond all that had been known before, so transforming the trajectory of historical disclosure with the emergence of dominant forms of science, and moves towards the repositioning of philosophy as a practice in the modern world.

From a philosophical standpoint, what is signified by historical disclosing and how is this connected to any disclosive space?

Quite simply as Spinoza et al., [1997] argue, there are several ways in which disclosive activity can change the style of a disclosive space – and this type of activity they call 'historical disclosing' [ibid: 22]. Here we need to create significant distance from Bacon's writings and the Cartesian view of the world which emerged a little later. Both of these world views rely upon a worldless dispassionate subject. At issue in understanding disclosive space, is that it projects a view of the world that is embodied and experiential – and not a matter of intellectual activity involving dispassionate reflection. The latter is the Cartesian position. It views the world as a matter for the intellect and that invention we call the mind. This is the very basis for the dominant forms of neo-liberalism now inscribed in so many educational practices.

In order to be clear on the issue at stake in disclosive space, let's remind ourselves again, of John Dewey's standpoint in *The Art of Experience*. In pragmatic terms Dewey understands experience in terms of the interplay of doing something AND in undergoing and so feeling that practice. It is our feelings, Heidegger reminds his readers in *Being and Time*, that are the first and foremost guide for our practices, and not the intellect.

In order to cultivate disclosive space for historical disclosing, therefore, we need to employ a skill where there is a distinct feeling that the actions taken are not appropriate. Spinoza et al., [1997] refer to 'disharmonies' – these are 'practices in which we engage that common sense leads us to overlook because they are not well coordinated with other practices' [ibid: 23]. So what is it that makes the world look different? What is it that cultivates a radical transformation in the way the architectural space constituted by signs is disclosed to participants in practice?

Spinoza et al.,'s case example of the skill of disharmony, the skill of learning through intensive engagement in practice, brings into sharp relief its difference with Cartesian/ neo-liberalist ways of disclosing the world of practice. Rather than the latter – for the Cartesian this is always a matter of cold, intellectual and disengaged thinking/reflection – Spinoza et al., choose a couple whose relationship is out of sorts. Rather than the traditional detached Cartesian based approach, the couple:

Throw themselves into activities that seem to have made the relationship alive and worthwhile... they do it with a special sensitivity and alertness to what is unusual

because they know that focusing upon what is unusual can focus upon what is different now from the times when those activities worked [ibid: 24].

In this way through intense dialogue and in being sensitive to disharmony the couple came to a conviction together about what they each *needed to do* in order to make the world look different again. In taking seriously Spinoza et al.,'s point about what is missing – from their own account of this couple they don't distinguish between the metaphysical 'disclosive space' – and the *spacing* in which the couple live during their intensive engagement: a time together which feels timeless, beyond the reach of our invention of clock time.

Let us join Biesta once more. There remains the much more difficult issue of whether through education larger groups of people may also be influenced to re-engage with their own practices.

At issue is the question of how one makes plain the architecture of disclosive space/spacing produced within community settings in ways that have some chance of encouraging others to begin to see the disharmonies in their own practices.

Given there are many issues involved here in moving to conclude this paper I just wish to focus upon two. First is the issue of the *event* of practice – including education, research, and, of course, any professional practice and other non-professional practices. The second related issue concerns the ontotheological structuring of practices and their relationship with ourselves as human beings. In focusing upon this latter issue I wish to draw out the significance of heterogeneously structured

practices, rather the dominant forms of homogeneous economies/ethics/aesthetics of practices.

The Event of Practice

Some readers may have wondered earlier why I bothered to include the French term, *événement*. At issue are the delimitations created by the English language. It's semantic structures for 'event' tend to ensure that everything about an event can be gathered by being as presence, the is, into the present moment. The result being that everything about any event, its very conditionality, is always predictable, controllable, and calculable. But, as Biesta suggests in his writing about education, is it not important to draw a distinction between a life giving event, [*événement*], as something coming [*venir*] and as something to come [*a venir*] from an engineered and planned tomorrow. Such a life giving event is always and unconditionally impossible to control, its many life giving possibilities are always impossible to enumerate: it is located within a heterogeneous economy/ethic. In the French language the semantic structures keep open space for the life giving event as something to come, as distinct from the ontology of what is happening at every moment in that invention we call clock time.

But, in returning to the issue of disharmony, in focusing upon disclosive architectures constituted in language, there remains the question of just how communities may come to engage with the difference between the engineering of an event and what unfolds in the lives of people involved in the same event. The challenge in seeking to uncover architectures of disclosive space

constituted in languages of education, is just how this may become real for people to the point where they become possessed with a conviction about the importance and significance of such a distinction. At least the semantic structures of the French language make obvious such a distinction.

An omnipresent version of the obfuscation of any possible difference between the event and the programmed tomorrow comes with the event of what Heidegger [1991] identified by the neologism, *das Ge-stell* that is roughly translated as technological enframing in education. *Das Ge-stell* constitutes a way of revealing the world of education which has become dominant in practice. It is cultivated on the basis of the ontotheological structuring of practices.

Disharmony in the enframing of education

Technological enframing [*das Ge-stell*] arises from the engineered event of the emplacement [*Stellung*] of signs, in order that truth claims to knowledge may be made in practices of education. At issue is the capacity to place [*stellen*] and so create truthful representations [*Vorstellungen*] of knowledge. But in this particular rendering [*Zustellen*] of practice, what is disguised [*Verstellen*] almost completely is the difference between the unfolding life giving event involving any particular being and the ontological representation of that some entity as an object. The grounding for such instrumental forms of education – which Biesta [2013] understands as ‘strong, secure, and predictable’ – is what I have called the ‘principle of assessment’:

nothing of educational value is without assessment’.

It’s important here to think of projections of beings or entities as possibilities – not statistical possibilities, but possibilities that are projected from experience. And these possibilities are projected against a trace of being, the trace of the background to any projections without which they would not be possible. For Heidegger, the meaning of being is that upon which [*das Woraufhin*] which holds those projections of understandings, and gives them some kind of structure. Assessment in education, as a principle, now acts as a meaning maker for all formal systems of education. Consequently, the economies of education have been rendered as delimiting, by what Biesta calls strong forms of education.

Enframing is cultivated in practices through the ontotheological structuring of education. The ground for all beings Heidegger sees being created when metaphysical determinations of practice become ontology – that is, in expressions of what is done in practice. Such grounds are then cultivated in practices of education through actions taken, the content of the practice, its reality, whatness and being as such...

The theological structuring of practices in education may be understood in terms of structures which delimit what are considered as the highest beings attainable within the context of a particular ontological grounding of such practice. The organization, form, the subject, what is real, the idea as paradigm, beings as a whole are all theological structures. What connects these theological structures and their ontological groundings,

as mentioned earlier, are metaphysical determinations of practices, where signs are considered to point to particular entities/events.

The deconstructive approach advocated by Biesta when applied to such ontotheological structures, and to the effects of das *Ge-stell* in education, serve to cultivate an architecture of disclosive spaces in what Jacques Derrida calls the play of *différance* as the plus ultra cultivating all practices of language – which Biesta [2013] represents as a weaker form of education.

Reflections

At issue remains just how the heterogeneous economies/ ethics and aesthetics of practice cultivated by *différance* may become a force for engagement in different, albeit softer ways of understanding the practices of education. Ironically, such play is already at play in all forms of instrumental enframing dominating practices of education. Paradoxically, such play in our heterogeneous economies is *the* driving force hidden within neo-liberalist and capitalist economies. This is why we need to understand our relationship with the plus ultra in this age of technology. What is demanded, no less, is a thoroughgoing examination and exploration of architectures of spacing in which our lives unfold beyond any representations of practice. Architectures of spacing in which people live their lives. Not the current and dominant architectures of alienation producing space in which we live, ever in danger of being cut off from ourselves. In this sense while the *plus ultra* as a potential to take us beyond our contemporary world no longer has all the romance and adventure

of early modern times, its sublime powers to open societies now (as we speed into this new millennium) to new understandings of our world – this potential of the plus ultra up close in our lives we've not even begun to explore.

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Correspondence:

Dr Kevin J. Flint
Reader in Education
International Association for
Practice Doctorates
Tel: 07531754709
kevin.flint@ntu.ac.uk
www.professionaldorates.org

