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12 Context, entanglement and assemblage as matters of concern in comparative education research

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Decontextualized education research has the rather obvious blindspot of ignoring how it is that the specificities of local environments, relationships and phenomena shape and construe what occurs in and around educational settings as well as how particular knowledges, actors and institutions are drawn together in various arrangements. For this reason, the idea that education research needs to be *contextualized* is generally taken as widespread commonsense. Yet, what it means to contextualize and how researchers in the field of comparative and international education should take up questions of “context” in their work remain both unresolved and neglected. This chapter proposes approaching context as more a “matter of concern” than a “matter of fact” (Latour, 2004b). In the spirit of advancing the practice of “criss-crossing comparison” (Seddon, McLeod and Sobe, this volume), we map out an approach to context as a process of interweaving. As such, the social embeddedness of education is understood as interwoven through the relationality of objects, actors and environments, with the researcher her or himself playing an important “entangling” role in the construction of educational research contexts.

Though the importance of “contextualization” is widely recognized in education research, there is no agreement on how to do this, nor what it means for comparative research methods. As education researchers who are at once located in North American academic homes and enmeshed in a number of globe-spanning academic circuits, we observe that context is often dichotomously framed either as something to be eclipsed or as all-important and inescapable (Sobe and Kowalczyk, 2012). Analogous to the somewhat sterile debates about “qualitative” and “quantitative” research, one can schematically identify currents in comparative and international education that maintain that schools, teaching and learning have universal qualities that facilitate the portability of best practices and lesson learning. From this perspective, comparison becomes a science of *ceteris paribus*, a science of learning how to control for contextual factors to properly construct knowledge. Alternately, our field also contains research currents which hold that educational interactions have a situational specificity that forecloses the easy possibility of “transfer”. From this angle, comparison itself can sometimes appear as a modernist artefact and governing tool linked to neo-colonialism. In this chapter, our goal is less to collapse these dualisms than it is to frame out a mode for thinking about context that will

facilitate the enactment of criss-crossing comparative education studies that allow us “to look both at and behind the landscape of tangible things to surface patterns and processes of knowing and doing that configure globalising education” (Seddon, McLeod and Sobe, this volume).

Taking big “C” Contexts and little “c” contexts as matters of concern

One of the key issues that weaves across this 2018 *World Year Book* is the question of how to approach embeddedness and situatedness. As we have discussed in a previous publication titled “Exploding the cube” (Sobe and Kowalczyk, 2013), much comparative education research treats context as pre-existing, “there whether you like it or not” surroundings to be identified and taken into consideration at the outset of a project. The most common expression of this is Mark Bray and R. Murray Thomas’s (1995: 475) proposal that educational comparisons can be framed by situating a study where a particular geographic/location level (e.g. classroom, country, world region) intersects both with the particular “aspect of education and of society” (e.g. curriculum, educational finance, political change) and the “nonlocational” demographic group under consideration (e.g. ethnic groups, age groups, the entire populations). Our chief critique of this approach is that it treats contexts as what Latour (2004a) would characterize as *matters of fact*,¹ whereas matters of fact possess “clear boundaries”, have predictive value and are “risk free objects”, a *matter of concern* is a risky “tangled” business (ibid.: 22–23) that engages the unexpected and the emerging. Too often context has been treated as a matter of fact and invoked as a unity that is always already-there, waiting to be observed and described via stable categories. In pace with Latour, we do not propose to move away from matters of fact as any step away from a realist attitude. Instead, we hold that a realist understanding of the facts of the matter means that the researcher’s attention must be directed to how contexts are made.

One strategy for taking up context as a matter of concern is to distinguish between what we have referred to as big “C” Contexts and little “c” contexts (Sobe and Kowalczyk, 2013). This move is indebted to the distinction Gee (1990, 1999, 2015)-proposed between big “D” Discourse and little “d” discourse. Big “D” Discourse refers to historically and socially constructed constellations that permit one to perform or identify particular “kinds of people” or kinds of activities. Discourse includes little “d” discourse, or “language-in-use” (1999, 2015), where language coupled with other particular “actions, interactions, objects, tools, technologies, beliefs, and values,” (2015) come together in practices that authorize or challenge particular ways of being and doing. We suggest that it can be useful to distinguish between big “C” Context as the set of historically and socially significant Discourses within education research that interweave actors and objects and govern what it is possible to think and to do, and little “c” contexts as the set of named elements that are seen as comprising a given setting.

In this schema, locational descriptors are one part of big “C” Context. It is by now well-trodden ground to question methodological nationalism in educational research (Dale and Robertson 2009; Shahjahan and Kezar 2012), yet the

answer is not simply for researchers to disabuse themselves of thinking about nations. It is instead to ask *and make a part of the research* how nation forms and “national imaginaries” – through the ways that they themselves are assembled – shape and are shaped by the educational phenomena or processes under examination (see, e.g. Popkewitz 2008). Similarly, it is incumbent on the comparative education researcher to probe concepts like “civilization” and “urban” when they are encountered, to understand what is being gathered together in these notions and to what effects. Additionally, to grapple with transnationalism in globalizing time-spaces of education calls for an interrogation of the politics of scale – again, not to force a pre-arrayed schema onto a particular situation but rather to delve into the Context that includes the specific forms and frames that social embeddedness takes (c.f. Wastell 2001).

The categories “political”, “economic” and “cultural” also merit examination as forms of big “C” Context. To use these categories in the making of context underscores the ways that the categories of big “C” Contexts create knowledge about characteristics over which rule can be exercised (Rose 1999). This phenomenon is clearly illustrated by the “newly discovered island” heuristic employed by neo-institutional sociologists of education (Meyer et al. 1997) to explain the ways that institutionalized world models define and de/legitimate local agendas. They predict that if a previously uncontacted island were discovered, its inhabitants would be pressured to begin organizing themselves according to world models that have their origin in North America and Europe but have since been spread widely around the globe. The island would be conceptualized as “a society” with “an economy” and “a government” and it would enter into a surprisingly standardizing machine of academic knowledge production. As Meyer and colleagues are well aware, to splice out Context into different dimensions in this manner is to construct domains of action and surfaces of intervention.

The features of big “C” Contexts are the black-boxed units of reference that often appear in research studies in a short-hand manner, as if possessing unquestionable and stable analytic power. For most of its history, the field of comparative and international education has been entirely incorrect when analysing the relation between schools and nations: the critical error being to treat the nation-state as an explanatory independent variable from which most of the salient aspects of schools and school systems flow, when instead the nation needs to be taken as something that needs to be explained (Sobe 2014). Big “C” Contexts, too – as we will discuss in greater detail in the next section in reference to the traditional separation of “objects” and “contexts” – need their share of explaining. We maintain that this is a matter of concern of significant political and ethical import because individual instances of little “c” context are only intelligible through Contexts with a “big C”.

Entanglement and relationality

The comparative education researcher who takes Context as a “matter of concern” is not interested in the traditional object of study contained within a

context, but rather examines the relationality between objects and contexts: how they come to be intelligible and conjoined, and to what effect(s). This approach raises to the surface the question of what makes it possible for us to see objects as objects – particularly as problems to be studied. As indicated in the introduction to this volume, “entangled approaches” can be particularly useful for studying and understanding these relationships.

In a foundational piece on *Histoire Croisée* (commonly translated into English as “entangled history”) Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (2006) have outlined a research approach that aims to overcome some of the limitations of comparative history as it is traditionally undertaken, as well as some of the limitations of transfer research. Much comparison embeds a thinking about time-spaces that requires the deployment of a series of mechanisms to fix and pause the flow of time so that a cross-sectional object can be stabilized and discerned. This kind of thinking is tied to the making of context as a matter of fact where the researcher pulls out one particular moment from a flowing heterotemporal and heterospatial assemblage, what Žižek calls a process of “decoherence”, when from “the coherent multiplicity of superposed states” one option “is cut off from the continuum of others and posited as a single reality” (Žižek 2016: 50). Transfer approaches focus on temporally unfolding processes (as is evidenced by the educational borrowing and learning research literatures mentioned above) but are frequently marked by invariability in the categories of analysis and an inability to adequately deal with complex situations where movements are reciprocal and in multiple directions at once (cf. Stoler 2001). Werner and Zimmermann’s *Histoire Croisée* is an attempt to move research beyond transfer and beyond comparison by putting interaction, intersections and inter-crossing at the centre of the analysis and by giving renewed attention to reflexivity. Entangled history can usefully refer to “analysis of the tangling together of disparate actors, devices, discourses and practices – with the recognition that this tangling is partly accomplished by said actors, devices, discourses and practices and partly accomplished by the historian her/himself” (Sobe 2013: 100).

An entangled approach accesses the concept of the “assemblage” (see also Larsen, this volume), which is an as if anti-structural structural concept that permits the researcher to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral in social life and social interactions that are nonetheless ordered and coordinated. George Marcus and Erkan Saka (2006: 102) describe the assemblage as maintaining the idea of a structure while at the same time evoking movement and change. In this way, it is both spatial and temporal. The ideas of Deleuze form an important basis of much work around assemblages, which he saw as:

a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes, and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage’s only unity is that of co-functioning . . . It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.

(Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 69–70)

The contingency and constant shape-shifting of an assemblage do not, however, de-emphasize the work that is involved in bringing and fusing together disparate elements to create something that informs, shapes and is itself re-shaped by human actions and forms of social organization.

The notions of entanglement and assemblage invite us to spend less time trying to crisply demarcate the boundaries between an object of interest and its “context”, and instead to direct our energies towards understanding social embeddedness by studying education phenomena and practices as assemblages. If the traditional approach to contextualization is to situate a research object within a particular, prescribed hierarchically arranged space at a given moment, rather than a “placing”, Werner and Zimmerman emphasize movement and intercrossings, so that attention shifts what emerges over time. The object of analysis becomes two things at once: one, the assemblage that is often mistaken for “context” and two, the effect (policy, practice, phenomena) that it constitutes (what we might think of as the traditional “object” of study): “Intercrossing is thus obviously an aspect of both the realm of the object of study and the realm of the procedures of research related to the researcher’s choices” (2006: 44).

Entangled analysis engages in empirical and reflexive practice through “pragmatic induction” (ibid.: 46) where research begins with “the object of study and the situations in which it is embedded, according to one or more points of view . . . subject to continual readjustments in the course of empirical investigation” (ibid.: 47). If we conceptualize criss-crossing comparative education as similarly marked by continual readjustments and intercrossing over the course of a study, then it also becomes possible to see contexts and objects in relational terms – and in terms of their historicity as forming an unstable, changing and heterogeneous assemblage, which is partly made visible by the processes and entities under investigation and partly by the researcher.

The messiness of interweaving and researcher entanglement

In our effort to rethink “contextualization” as a necessary component of academic research we have found it useful, albeit with a sense of irony, to return to the etymology of the word (Sobe and Kowalczyk 2013). This allows us to put aside the sediments of “background” and “placement” and “location” that have accrued over time and rearticulate the relationship between Context and object. From the Latin verb *texere*, meaning “to weave,” and with the prefix *con*, or “with,” *contexere* has the meaning “to weave together” or “to interweave”. Embracing the *contexere* notion of interweaving usefully reminds us to pay attention to the way, as feminist scholars have long pointed out, that researchers themselves are entangled in that which they study. It also invites us to consider the researcher as one who – in the Levi-Straussian model of the *bricoleur* – actively weaves historical artefacts and elements together to fabricate social embeddedness. In this vein Latour (2004b: 246) usefully reminds us that “the critic is not one who debunks but one who assembles.”

Thinking of contextualization as *contexere* invites us to think about contexts as being made over and over again as the researcher tracks and accounts for needed

adjustments categories and knowledges over the course of the study. These constant adjustments trace both the messy ways in which people, objects and ideas interconnect/intercross, and the multiple perspectives embedded within the making of contexts, inclusive of the researcher's perspective(s) and intervention(s). Werner and Zimmermann propose that an entangled, criss-crossing approach,

... integrates into the operation of contextualization carried out by the researcher the referential dimension of the objects and practices analyzed, taking into account both the variety of situations in which the relationships to the context are structured and the effect that the study of such situations exerts on the analytical procedures.

(Werner and Zimmermann 2006: 47)

Taking this approach to researcher entanglement necessitates a high degree of comfort with ambiguity and "messiness", as well as with the likelihood that a focus on relationality will illuminate many things at once. In the effort to engage a criss-crossing comparative education, educational practices, phenomena and policies can usefully be approached as "messy objects", a term used by Fenwick and Edwards, who propose that

Any changes we might describe as policy – new ideas, innovations, changes in behavior, transformations – emerge through the effects of relational interactions and assemblages, in various kinds of more-than-human networks entangled with one another, that may be messy and incoherent, spread across time and space.

(Fenwick and Edwards 2011: 712)

In tracing out interactions and assemblages, the role of the researcher is both to entangle and detangle.

Though in this chapter we have proposed several strategies for reworking how context is articulated in comparative and international education; we still consider the challenge of social embeddedness an ongoing problem. As an issue at the core of changing space-times of education, contexts – both big "C" and little "c", interwoven and entangled assemblages – remain an important matter of concern for our field.

Note

- 1 In recent work, Bray, Adamson and Mason (2007) have usefully reflected on limitations to the cube, particularly, for example, on the ways that the various filters could be reframed. The geographic filter could be expanded to allow a focus on countries affected by a particular colonial experience (Manzon, 2007) or on countries/regions with religious commonalities. Bray and his colleagues have even proposed that multiple cubes could be arrayed along a temporal axis to afford comparisons across time. While they do recognize significant limitations, including the definitional "slipperiness" (2007: 370) that emerges when the units of comparison delineated in the cube are actually deployed

by researchers, they nonetheless note, "good comparative education researchers will necessarily consider factors along each of the axes [of the cube] before they isolate the variables pertinent to their hypotheses" (Bray, Adamson and Mason 2007: 371).

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