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Exploring the Geographies and Anthropologies of International Students from a Spatial Perspective



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Introduction

This is a summary of my master's thesis about what happens in and through encounters of international students and lecturers. The thesis is based on four months ethnographic fieldwork at a Danish higher education (HE) institution near Copenhagen and is shaped by a spatial approach. My interest in the complex and dynamic concept of 'space' was triggered when I listened to Marianne Larsen's (2016) thoughts on space in educational research. She describes space as "that thing that is produced through social practices, through relationships, through how we relate or connect to one another", and this space which we create "enables and constrains who we are, what we are, how we act and how we relate to one another". Larsen (2016) shows here in quite simple terms how space creates and forms us in certain ways. We are affected by space; it shapes who we are and what we feel right at this moment. Being an international student myself, I think this deep fascination and desire to study and explore space is very much connected to my own experiences. As an international student, you step outside your familiar system, you leave certain structures, situations, places, roles, positions and people. You move to a new place, you experience and learn within an unfamiliar academic culture. Yet, you do not only study but you live in this new environment. You find yourself a home, settle in, you get to know people, build relations and friendships, you are happy when you slowly understand small bits of the unknown language. You feel full every night because you soak in everything around you.

At the same time, being an international student is somewhat an unpacking of the familiar in the unfamiliar. You arrive at a new place but you bring with you a cultural background, traditions, routines, an educational path, life events that shaped you in a way, you come to the new place as an individual being and yet our identity is not something static or stable, rather it is an ongoing performance (Butler, 1990). Intrigued by my own experiences of a somewhat heightened sensitivity to the (new, unfamiliar) space around me as an international student, I started to think about how wider social, political and cultural contexts may shape our practices and ways of thinking, and how these may show and play into processes and modes of inhabiting new places and the (social) production and experience of space. Simply put, I started to wonder how people make sense of the place around them, and how and why our perceptions may differ. The main interest for my ethnographic work was driven by the curiosity to explore a relational and productive sense of space between people and places but I also wanted to discover spaces that may offer productive and creative opportunities.

The core question of my thesis was:

- How can a spatial approach to internationalisation open perspectives on greater, global relations impacting contextual, everyday practices and discourses in higher education?

Relating to this central aim, I further examined the following research questions:

- How does internationalisation take place beyond the campus?
- How does internationalisation (re)shape students' and lecturers' perceptions of what it means to be a 'good student' in HE?
- How does nationality – both students' own and their imaginaries of others' – play into students' experiences of internationalisation?

Thinking with Space – Analytical Framework

Inspired by the spatial and mobility turn within social sciences and humanities, I applied a spatial approach. In the 1990s, scholars within these fields became increasingly interested in spatial dimensions of various phenomena (Warf and Arias, 2008). The spatial turn was followed by the mobility turn, adding a perspective on mobility to the spatial theories (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Attending to both, spatial and mobility theories, I explored the complex relationality of people and places connected through movement and performances. Beech and Larsen (2014) present and critique what they call a 'spatial empire of the mind' which consists of a set of taken-for-granted assumptions about space and place. Places have been characterised by their fixity and have been constituted by physical settings. Often, notions of home, of community and belonging are ascribed to place. The concept of 'space' is instead primarily linked to rather abstract and amorphous features. Space is associated with images of flow and activity (Beech and Larsen, 2014).

Such conceptions, positing a separation between place and space, limit researchers' capacities to capture the relations and connections of the actors engaging within the (global) educational field. According to Massey (1995) spatial movement has become so fast and so extended, crossing and connecting places, that the notion of place as distinct, bounded and somewhat separate from each other needs to be rethought. Massey (1995) sees possibility in studying place variation for understanding diversity, difference, and (geographically) uneven notions generated by processes operating on a global scale. Within complex networks places are not so fixed; places are dynamic. Places are about relationships, about the people who engage and interact with one another, materials, proximities (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Valuing and following the claim of rethinking notions of space and place, I applied an analytical framework that allowed me to investigate relational and productive capacities between and within places and to explore how space is constructed through social interaction and processes that concurrently shape and give (new) meaning to places.

Fieldwork and Methods

I engaged with incoming international student teachers for the timespan of one semester at a Danish HE institution. The teaching profession and the education of teachers is strongly nationally entrenched and designed around demands of a particular national professional profile (Sieber & Mantel, 2012). Student teachers are being trained to educate future (good) national (and global) citizens. Following the group of international student teachers enabled me to look at this national educational course of study within the global, relational frame of internationalisation. The group of incoming students consisted of a little more than one hundred students. The majority of my participants were part of the Erasmus+ programme, only a few were part of non-European partner relations. All courses for international students were taught in English. Some courses were offered only for international students and some were mixed classes of Danish and international students. I observed five courses four days a week.

The project was based on ethnographic fieldwork. I used participant observation (Madden, 2010, Davies, 1999) and different kinds of interviews such as timeline interviews (Adriansen, 2012), focus group interviews (Crang & Cook, 2007), and individual/pair interviews. After one month in the field, I decided to offer a 'creative space group' for students with the aim to provide and open up a space to work and express things through visual and creative ways. Every week, I prepared a poem, a landing or a short story as an introduction, and we would then work on a creative task. I decided on themes around relational aspects of space and place, thinking of the visual outcomes as possible interesting and valuable artefacts beneficial for any further analysis of my research. Donnelly, Gamsu and Whewall (2020) propose a new method which they call 'mapping tool' aimed to elicit the relational construction of people and places. The tool was developed based on their study into the geographic im/mobilities among HE students in the UK. Participants create a map which can then be seen as visual representations of their geographic imaginaries, colouring or marking their perceptions and possible preferences of different localities, which is then followed by an interview approach wherein the participants tell about their maps. Inspired by this approach, I printed out blank world maps and chose the following four questions: Where do you plan to teach? Where would you like to teach? Where are teachers most respected? Where is the best place to teach? Each question had a different colour and the students were free to choose as many places as they wished. I started each focus group interview with handing out the maps, and the students would share their narratives about their choices afterwards.

Following now is a summary of each analysis chapter of my thesis. I explored Academic Space, Living Space and (Inter)National Space.

Academic Space

The main setting of this chapter was the ‘international’ classroom. I explored how students are socialised into an academic culture through various ‘methods of becoming’ (Simandan, 2002), such as memorising, obedience, or in opposition dialogic teaching and active participation, developing a specific way of acting, seeing and to an extent a ‘blindness’ (Ulriksen, 2009). I weaved in Ulriksen’s (2009) analysis and concept of the ‘implied student’, which attunes to unspoken, implicit anticipations about what studying is. Becoming a student at a HE institution, students enter a specific academic and disciplinary culture. Throughout their studies, students learn to understand and engage with the specific ways of their discipline; they develop a certain way of thinking and seeing, which after all is an important part of HE. Academic socialisation, however, is far more than just a particular way of seeing and thinking. “It means the construction of a social identity as a legitimate student of the specific discipline. The student must learn to *do* the study in a way that is recognisable to others as a legitimate way of being a student in the specific discipline” (Ulriksen, 2009: 518). Thus, becoming a HE student means that students have to relate to, adhere and interpret a complex of elements and a set of rules, actively performing the role of the implied student.

Most of the incoming students were used to a stricter system and a rather formal way of communication than the one in Denmark. They described their position within class settings at home as passive, having to sit quietly and to listen to the lecturers. Soon, a student from South Korea said, for example, “We usually just follow how the professor wants us to make our product. When we brainstorm we can think of our own free ideas but it usually tends to be a conversation like, ‘this is what our professor wanted us to think about and we made a product’”, and Aneta from Ukraine mentioned that in her home institution she felt the lecturers were “one step higher” and that there was a certain distance between them. I noticed on several occasions, either in classroom talks, casual conversations or in interview situations that various international students used the same phrase, “they just give you knowledge” when reflecting on their home institutions, referring here to facts and theories and which seems to mirror a rather passive, recipient role without much engagement or active participation. In a small conversation Marina from Azerbaijan said, referring to her home institution, “we only work with theory, it’s so boring. Here you can learn with activities, you can read a lot and remember it”. During an interview with two Azerbaijanian girls at a later point, they emphasised feeling “more free” within lessons, linking it primarily to notions of a greater agency and own responsibility of their learning process. A student from Ireland mentioned that she liked that lecturers at the institution in Denmark were not dictating the students around. Given more freedom to choose and decide, she concluded led to a stronger engagement on her side. I suggest to link the students’ accounts and the sense of being more

free, more active and involved in class to the emphasis in Denmark on investigation, exploration, and discovery of knowledge.

Coming to Denmark from various places, the students had to identify certain characteristics of the host institution and what it meant to be a student here, but also how to engage with the other students in the room, recognising mutual expectations of each other and learning to understand the way other students may practice being a student. In a focus group interview with three students from Lebanon, one of them, Ahmet, reflected, "I always want to be the leader in the group. When I came here first, I noticed, I had to change this, this won't work here, I was listening. In Lebanon, we don't listen to each other, we just talk, talk, talk, we don't actually listen. I don't hear you". Pjotr from Ukraine referred to a similar experience, "it was like nice to see that they [international students] feel comfortable, then you like see, it's okay to talk a lot, to raise your hand and also to comment something the teacher has said". Over some weeks, I engaged more closely with a student from China. During class, he seemed uncomfortable and serious. The student told me about his feelings of stress and even panic. He described a discrepancy between his usual practice as a student or his idea of what a (good) student is like and the practice that seemed to be the acceptable one at his host institution in Denmark. He was asked to work in groups and make presentations in front of the whole class and thereby was expected to operate in speaking and learning modes in which he seemed to have limited experience. In general, the international students experienced the role of being a student differently, and their possibilities to perform the role of the recognised, competent student varied as well. It depends on values and norms of the respective discipline but also on, for instance, gender or cultural background (Ulriksen, 2009). Observing a group of international students, we come to see that what it means to be a 'good student' is always place-specific. Space and place co-produce the policed norms of practices and (disciplinary) knowledge traditions performed through varied 'methods of becoming' and these norms impact specific ways of seeing and shape one's professional becoming.

Both students and lecturers bring expectations with them concerning what it means to be a student. Thus, lecturers have as well implied students, which is similar to what Becker (1952) calls the 'ideal client'. He points out that teachers' perceptions of the ideal client is linked to "the implicit assumptions which institutions, through their functionaries, make about the society around them" (ibid. 465). The lecturer's ideal client relates to the institutional and societal setting, and is not simply individually produced. Pernille, one of the lecturers with a Danish background said, for example, "My Danish students always want to discuss. The international students sit and just take down all notes. They are more schooled, trying to model the good student", and another lecturer mentioned in an interview that she found it sometimes challenging to teach international students because they would not react the same way as the Danish students. The Danish lecturers were used to students who would discuss, debate and engage actively. Whereas it seems that the majority of international students had been exposed to a HE setting in their home countries where it meant to obey silently was to

be a competent, good student. Taking these observations into account, we are exploring the way people are impacted and concurrently actively confront the ideological conditions and ideas presented by educational systems and institutions (Levinson and Holland, 1996), and we come to follow how within an international context, students and lecturers find and negotiate ways to creatively occupy the academic space. Within this context, I see a demand for reflection on pedagogical issues and responsibility that student mobility presents. Interesting here was how sometimes lecturers called it a 'Danish' and sometimes an 'international' classroom. These observations brought up thoughts about how we may "locate" the 'international' classroom, in the sense to think about how it is international and/or to what extent it is national. Do we have an international group of students in a 'Danish' classroom, or how can/do we make space for students' various backgrounds and try to make the most out of such diversity?

Living Space

Throughout fieldwork, I also began to explore students' lived experiences beyond campus; we went dancing on the weekends, I visited them at their homes, or comforted them when feeling homesick. I learned about their individual, personal and even inner world. I investigated students' personal and private life off-campus. I explored how various spaces, such as familiar, everyday, national and domestic space are entangled in students' production of geographies and identities. I looked at different forms of spatial performances focusing on social and spatial connections, processes of constructing activity spaces, and notions of 'home-making'. I drew on primarily the visualisations from the timeline interviews (Adriansen, 2012) conducted, which provided a rich basis to both students' life in Denmark and their home countries.

Many of the international students were offered accommodation and lived together in shared houses or apartments spread around Copenhagen and the smaller suburbs. The accommodations the students shared became their home in Copenhagen. Each one of them brought with them things, traditions, food, and experiences from the wider world into these places, creating a dynamic and social space, constructing a home. Living together involved sharing intimate moments with each other, cooking and eating dinner together, comforting each other, or having small parties on the weekends. This sense of familiarity showed also in classroom situations. For instance, students sharing a home often worked in study groups together. One class session around Christmas, the students were asked to work on their final assignments in their groups, some of the students living together in a shared house were gathered around one table, listening to Christmas songs, singing along, enjoying themselves. Most of them wore sweatpants and Christmas sweaters. They communicated in intimate ways, sharing inside jokes, making fun of each other about certain habits, and were often using little expressions in the others' languages that they had learned from one another. A similar class setting occurred again during the last presentation day. The same students sat together, sharing their baked cookies and other snacks. They had again arranged a "dress-code"; all female students wore dresses for their presentation. It seems that sharing a home and being together in processes of tackling this new world around them, the students produced closer relationships and a sense of community.

In an interview, one participant said, "For me, Denmark is better, you can't be ashamed of something". He emphasised that he enjoyed the freedom, the friendly and open-minded people and he felt free to do what he wanted to do. Just before he reflected on these feelings, he had told me about how difficult it was for him to live in Poland as a young gay person and the objectionable reactions he received. He said, "It's really hard to stay in Poland because you're always closed, I am always closed and always deep inside myself". The student seemed to be constantly reminded of his inadequate or inappropriate existence in his home

country, which carries notions of regulation of social existence and social exclusion. During another interview, Olga from Ukraine described her home system as strict and said she felt that she was not faced with objectivity. Further, she reflected that in Ukraine everyone seemed usually to be in a hurry to finish education to then get married and have children. In Copenhagen, she said, “when I feel myself here, I don’t feel like I need to be in a rush (...) but I am really confused, every day, this is me, the person who doesn’t feel like in the right place”. She eventually said that she felt more like a real human being here in Denmark.

The students’ bodily presence somewhere other than their familiar place, their home society carries an active production out of their ordinary connections and local spheres, which offers possibilities for reflection and a heightened space for consciousness. The students reflected and expressed feelings of freedom and independency, but also started questioning institutions and educational systems. Identities of people continuing to live in familiar space remain shaped by national, local and domestic habits and routines (Edensor and Sumartojo, 2018). Understanding identity not as stable or static but instead as an ongoing performance, as a subject position dependent on both, the other individuals around us *and* the places where we learn or also live (Simandan, 2002), brings to the forefront of enquiry the change of place. The students left their familiar place, their family home and came to Copenhagen to study. I suggest that the idea of a ‘regulative ideal’, as outlined above ‘the good student’, also exists within other contexts than academic disciplines, as we can see here with taking into account the wider social and political contexts which play a role in the students’ production of geographies (Simandan, 2002).

(Inter)National Space

In the third analysis chapter, I examined student mobilities from a broader geographical perspective. I did not only take into account students' first culture learning environments but attuned more specifically to how their national backgrounds may play into small-scale interactions and how such show in certain manifestations of power, positioning, distancing and othering. I explored group constellations and individual students' lived and felt experiences to tease out relations and dynamics of power that exist and developed between the students and which seem to root in larger, global connections and configurations. I investigated feelings of 'belonging' and 'acceptance' and came to discover a picture of hierarchical positions of the students within the international group that we may link to their national background, radiating a feeling of 'in and out of place' (Cresswell, 1996). I attuned to notions of the body as a space and not only in space (Valentine, 2001), and how bodily differences, perceptions and emotions play into 'othering' and 'positioning'. Overall interesting to think about here became the question of how the 'knowledgeable person' (Levinson and Holland, 1996) may be locally and nationally defined, which also links back to perceptions of the 'good student' (and 'good teacher').

With the students' narratives from the mapping tool, I analysed their perceptions and associations about specific places. I used the idea of imaginative geography (Beech, 2014) and the concept of 'spatial imaginaries' (Watkins, 2015). This allowed me to show students' perceptions of the Nordic countries (Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway) as favourable destinations to study and work. Often places are classified or categorised by spatial imaginaries as better than others, hence positioning places hierarchically, becoming commonly involved in processes of othering (Brooks, 2019). The approach of imaginative geography offers a perspective on not only images of the 'Other' but also of the 'Self' (Valentine, 2001). International student teachers were interesting candidates to explore their complex imaginative geographies that influenced their decision of where to study and what places around the world they may perceive as 'good' places in terms of 'good' education, and where we come to discover a link to the reiteration of Western academic imperialism. I also see this pointing to the general flow of students from marginalised countries to the north and/or western parts of the world, whereas the flow of ideas streams in opposite direction (cf. Brooks and Waters, 2011).

Concluding Remarks

Internationalisation has become an important tool and agenda in HE claimed to enhance the quality of education and research, and often it is framed as an aim in policies to increase student and staff mobility. Institutions' motives to internationalise are primarily driven by neoliberal and economic rationales (Haapakoski and Pashby, 2017). Lived experiences of international students and how internationalisation may affect, for example, ways of thinking or how it takes place also beyond the campus, however, has not been studied to the same extent. I see my thesis as a contribution to knowledge about academic practices, pedagogical approaches, and on the complex spatial relationship between any individual domestic HE setting and students' international and national academic and personal geographies. Applying a spatial perspective to the study of internationalisation of HE, I sought to open up a (more) nuanced and theoretically informed picture of small-scale moments of practices and discourses, and how such are shaped by large-scale, global relations and perceptions. In regard to this, I aimed to shed light on uneven geographies to highlight the importance to take on a critical stand when looking at internationalisation of HE as it is never a neutral process (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Through my spatial, relational approach, I have taken into account students' home place and place of study in Denmark. I have bridged and built a connection between these two places. In this sense it is the relation between space and place that matters, as much of my work shows how important it is to take into account where international students come from, what they bring with them, and how valuable these place-specific perceptions are and concurrently we come to see that such are the individual elements in the process of constructing space.

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