Towards a spatial 'self-help' map for teaching and living in a rural context

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For many teachers, an appointment to a rural school is their first experience of living and working in a context where they are highly visible and are likely to be known of and known about by far more people than they know of and know about. Space for 'making errors' and recovering from them without impairment to becoming an effective teacher, is very limited compared to teachers and other professionals who work in cities and can become largely anonymous once they leave their working contexts. The concept of a mental map is derived from my experience as a teacher in a rural town and Soja's (1996) challenge to think differently about space and spatiality. It focuses on three domain – personal, professional and public – and is presented as a way of supporting teachers to navigate and negotiate rural places which, contrary to some popular views, are complex and challenging.

Context, domains, map, rural, space

INTRODUCTION

Moving into a context that is different from the one you have grown up in and where you received your tertiary education, such as a small rural town, to become a teacher, usually presents many challenges for those involved. There is considerable literature on the preparation of teachers for rural and remote school contexts that emphasises the complexities (and as yet untapped options for doing better) of this task (Guenther and Weilbe, 1983; Nelson, 1983; Lake, 1985; Gibson, 1993; Yarrow et al., 1999; Sharplin, 2002; Boylan, 2003; Green and Reid, 2004). The literature also heavily underscores the need for specialised preparation of teachers for rural and remote schools, and essentially argues that the largely metro- centric models (Green andReid, 2004) of teacher education can be said to be not 'delivering the goods' as far as appropriately educating teachers for **living and working** in small and often relatively isolated rural populations.

The purpose of this paper is to move the focus of the preparation of teachers from pre-service inputs and processes, towards starting the building of a mental model in the form of a 'self help map' for navigating and negotiating living, being and working in rural spaces and places. I use my own story as a beginning teacher in a small rural town, plus an idea from Soja (1996) and I want to emphasise a word and a phrase from the previous sentence. They are *'starting'* and *'own story'*. *'Starting'* because this article is presented to the reader as very much a first and incomplete engagement with the concept, and *'own story'* because I present it in some detail since it is the data for the theorising. I draw on it extensively, and want to acknowledge at the outset that it is idiosyncratic and not verifiable. But it is hoped that relating the story can provide points of connection for the reader and some sense of resonance, as well as dissonance, which together with other 'own stories', will help to build and improve the ideas explored in this paper.

CONTEXT

It is important that some explication of the context of this paper is presented because of the myths and diversity of views and definitions that are associated with 'rural' and 'rurality' in Australia and in other countries.

Typically, rural and remote communities are characterised by small and often low density populations. Frequently, their economic base is reliant on a limited range of enterprises that are dependent on particular soil types, landforms and climatic conditions. In terms of the primary determinants of relationship patterns, credibility is often attributed more to who says something rather than the evidence for what is said. Significant emphasis is also placed on informal networks for communicating information and news (Yarrow et al., 1999).

In Australia there are a number of terms that are commonly used to denote locations and associated characteristics that are considered to be other than metropolitan. These include 'country', 'regional', 'the bush', 'outback', and 'isolated'. There are also terms of a more vernacular kind such as 'the back of beyond' and 'the sticks' that are used. Vernacular naming of non city locations also occurs in many other countries and especially those with very large landmasses like the continent of Africa and the United States, or those which are smaller in spatial terms but have contrasting landforms such as the United Kingdom.

In addition, there is a long tradition of scholarly work on the idea of 'rural' in the field of social philosophy as represented by reference to *gemeinschaft* and *geschallscaft.* Traditionally rural is associated with *gemeinschaft* because of its emphasis on individuals finding identity within the group and *geschallscaft* is associated more with modern emerging urban contexts. Hooper (2000) asserts that 'traditional *gemeinschaft* society was seen as the place of moral and social values whereas *geschallscaft* was seen as the place where these values and morals had broken down' (p 1).

Essentially there are instrumental and quantitative definitions of 'rural' and those of a more nuanced and quantitative kind. These have also been referred to as the geographical approach and the sociological approach (Hooper 2001; Mulley 1999; University of Ballarat, n.d.; Whitaker 1983). The former places an emphasis on population size and distance from large centres where there is an extensive range of human services available. The latter, while recognising that population size and distance are contributing elements to what constitutes rurality, focus very significantly on the cultural and relational dimensions of places and people.

In summary, rural and rurality are often assigned meanings which are largely straight forward and non problematic. On the other hand, as shown by the references immediately prior to this, understandings and definitions of 'rural' and 'rurality' and other related terms like 'remote' and 'isolated', are varied, often contested and culturally determined.

SPATIAL MAP

As noted previously, the idea of developing a spatial mental map as a source of support for teachers came from reflecting on my own experiences as a beginning teacher in a rural town using work by Soja (1996), that challenges individuals "to think differently about the meanings and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent *spaciality of human life* (like) place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory and geography" (p.1). In addition, a very thought- provoking article by Danaher, Danaher and Moriarty (2003) that considers how highly mobile workers disturb and disrupt spaces usually occupied by locals or permanent residents, and also draws upon some of Soja's work, has helped shape my thinking.

The spatial map is intended as a conceptual tool for teachers to help them locate, monitor and continuously adjust their relationship dynamics in a rural or remote context, so that they can optimise their effectiveness in terms of pedagogy, contribute towards building social capital, and gain a sense of personal satisfaction from living and working in a country location.

The issue of enhancing support for teachers in rural and remote locations continues to be particularly relevant for Australia where staffing country schools has been problematic since the introduction of free, secular and compulsory education in the mid nineteenth century

(Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000a). It is also relevant and topical in many developing countries, that have large rural populations, comparatively under-developed infrastructure, and a growing preference being expressed and actioned for living and working in large cities.

MY STORY

...stories reveal what it means in the chosen culture to tell one's story and give an account of one's career and work as a teacher

and

... it is also the case that (a sense of) place is created out of relationship

(Elbaz–Luwisch 2004, pp.387, 409)

In 1967, I was appointed as a teacher to a school in a rural community in South Australia with a population of approximately 1,000. I stayed there for six years. Nine years later after appointments in the state's capital city area, I returned to the country as a principal of a school of 900 primary and secondary students in a community of around 5,000 for four years. While the experience of my first time in a country town is used as the basis for the spatial map concept, my second tenure in a rural posting, which I do not write about here, reinforces for me, the value of having something to help navigate within small but complex contexts.

My appointment to a rural school was my first time of living and working in a small population centre. I was sent with literally a couple of brief pieces of advice from my departmental staffing officer, "country towns are friendly places and, teachers are very important and need to fit in" (Sharplin, 2002).

I was also given various documents to complete about housing requirements, furniture removal, and the name of the newly appointed principal to contact so that "he knew I was coming" and so that I "could be told what I would be teaching" – note not **who** I would be teaching!

"Friendly" was the descriptor ascribed to my new "home" and "fit in and be a good teacher" was the expectation of me. Taken at face value in the mid-1960s when Australia was becoming increasingly embroiled in the Vietnam War, when baby boomers were pushing their population bulge through all of the main dimensions of society – economic, political, social, and cultural – the descriptions and expectation seemed reasonable. What I had read of country Australia – some of the works by Henry Lawson, Allan Marshall's *I Can Jump Puddles*, and stories in popular magazines like the *Australian Post* – tended to confirm the "friendly" for me and also the "fit in". I had only one other reference point about country – a wealth of stories from my maternal grandfather who tried to "make a go of farming" not far from where I was now going to be a teacher.

Although it was a long drive from the capital city in very hot conditions (the last week in January before the start of the new school year), the actual physical entry into the town upon arrival in the district happened very quickly. The farming and natural environment became regulated built

environment in an abrupt way. My first impression was of being in a "new place" where the small scale of the buildings and infrastructure – apart from the town's grain silos – was in stark contrast to what I had left in the city six hours before.

The physical entry was soon followed by a brief social-community entry event because enquiries had to be made about getting the key to the house we had been allocated and also finding the location of it. This apparently simple task was laden with exchange messages because it was the first time for me to identify myself as "a teacher" and a potential new member of the local community as well as for an established member of the local community, a storekeeper, to know of me and my impending presence in "his town". I vividly recall a general welcome being made and a comment that, in retrospect, carried more significance than I ascribed to it when first made. "The last teachers in the house made a mess – I hope it will be fixed up and it does not happen again." My response was along the lines of, thanks for the information and it won't happen again (at that stage I had no details on what constituted "the mess") and then signed for and took the key.

By evening, just a few hours after arriving, word had started to filter out that a new teacher had arrived in town. A teacher who had been at the school the previous year called in to welcome us and said that "he had heard we had made it" – meaning we had survived the journey and not decided to turn around and go back upon seeing the town, which had happened before. By the end of the following day, many publicly visible events had occurred to signal our arrival – a removal van arrived and our furniture was unloaded; lights were turned on in the house; and a car was in the driveway. Very importantly, several transactions "in the main street" had taken place because of the need to buy food, organise a post office box (no home delivery) and drive past the school to see where we would be teaching.

Arriving, and the commencement of becoming situated in a place that contrasted greatly to my life experiences to that point, had all taken place within 24 hours.

It was part of teacher accommodation policy when I was first appointed to the country (actually I was sent because I was a bonded teacher, someone who had agreed to teach anywhere in the state for four years in return for the cost of being trained and being paid a stipend) that floor coverings were not provided by the Education Department in every room of a house. We had purchased some linoleum to put in the other rooms. To complete the job, I needed to buy some nails to secure the beading that held the covering in place. I went to the local hardware store to make the purchase.

Again in retrospect, the visit to the hardware store provided another significant arena for impressions formation and exchanging that would later impact on me as a teacher in the town. The purchase of the nails passed off without any special attention to it but it was the other enquiries and conversation that I had with the store owner that proved to be far more substantial in terms of my entry into the town as a teacher. The background to the conversation follows briefly.

I had noted that heating in the house was by a small combustion stove. I therefore used the purchase of the nails to enquire if the store sold briquettes, which at the time were a recently introduced fuel product used quite widely in the city. The store-owner lapsed into a broad grin, laughed and said that "he would probably not even sell a hundredweight of them in 10 years". Accepting the answer and keen not to be a joke at his pleasure, I withdrew my line of inquiry. "No mate, what you do is see a farmer or a friend and get a load of stumps." I thanked him for the information but having no friends in the town and not knowing any farmers, I did not have a clear idea of how to progress matters.

The exchange was conducted in good humour even through I felt I was "holding on to the losing end of the stick". However, it evidently provided a context for the hardware store owner to

enquire about any football experience I may have had and whether I would play locally. I briefly described my experience, said it was not of a very high standard and, yes, I would probably be interested in playing locally. This provided an opening for the store owner to ask me to play for his team. Given that it was the town team, I agreed. It did not occur to me that there were probably other teams outside the town who had players that resided in the town playing for them, or that teachers may have played for other teams, but both did.

From the visit to the hardware store to buy nails, a number of interactions took place that subsequently contributed quite substantially to the nature and character of my time in the town and school.

The key point of elaborating on the store event is that, while at one level, quite transitory and not of any apparent great moment, the consequences of the events started to take hold at an early formative time in "my stay" in the town and, because of the size of the community, were rapidly circulated through informal communication networks. Three consequences that are relevant to the building of the spatial mental map concept follow.

The first is that my enquiry about briquettes for heating led to me receiving feedback in the staffroom a few days later, to the effect that "the new teacher seems like a good bloke but he knows nothing at all about firewood." I was happy about the "good bloke" and also happy to "bear the cost" of no knowledge about firewood. In rural communities, it is often the case that there is knowledge that it is taken for granted one will know about, and if not, this is interpreted as a clear indication of you being an "outsider" or "a blow in".

The second consequence is linked to the first because it unfolded in a matter of days that the hardware store owner had two children who attended the local school, that he was a senior official in the town football club and, by marriage, was related to a range of mainly town-based families who were very sports-minded and very pro-town. On reflection, given his formal status as a business owner in the town, a parent and a club official, coming out of the exchange with a "tick for character" but a "cross for firewood knowledge" was, on balance, a good result. I know of situations where the early assessment of character and local knowledge duality has been in reverse order and, through informal networks and relationships, early labelling of a negative kind took hold and provided an additional factor to deal with while working towards becoming a recognised competent professional.

The third consequence for the development of the spatial map as a support for navigating and negotiating in small but relationship rich and complex rural contexts, is that agreeing to play for the town team quickly took on greater significance during the next few days as I met more teachers on staff, together with the principal, and started to become aware of the social structure of the district. It became apparent that there were very strong local district allegiances, which in addition to the early patterns of white settlement and the subsequent economic basis of each, were shaped and nurtured through sports teams – football (men), netball (women), cricket (men), and tennis (men and women). My assumption that male teachers at the school would play for the town team proved to be wrong. Several of the male teachers, in addition to teaching, also drove school buses, which was common practice in the 1950s and 1960s, and therefore boarded on farms in the district so they could drive students to and from school each day. Those who played sport for an outlying district brought into a small staff environment from time to time, dynamics that revolved around the rituals and loyalties of belonging to an entity "other than the town".

As a beginning teacher, the complexities of the situation I have briefly outlined in relation to me saying "yes" to playing for the town team were magnified by two other factors. The principal of the school – also newly appointed but with previous experience of living and teaching in a small country town – made it known that it was very important (he stopped short of using the term

'expected'), that town-based teachers should play for the town team. Intentionally or not, I felt that this created some tension and introduced a sense of an inner and an outer group because "the boss had clearly shown his hand in terms of teams".

Secondly, students at the school played sport for the town and district teams but, more substantially, because of the small numbers of players available, played with teachers as fellow team members. It is not necessary here to present a lengthy analysis of the consequences of this other than to emphasise that I experienced and observed radically different (and at times oppositional) attitudes and behaviours between the expectations of a sporting club and the expectations of the school. In the school context it was expected that students would respect teachers, use formal greetings and names when addressing a teacher, and would not be critical of school expectations or behaviour codes. In the sports team context, greetings became informal – first names and nicknames were expected – criticism and controlled aggression towards opponents was expected, and winning was the priority. As a young teacher with a strong sense of wanting to **be** a teacher, the dissonance between the two contexts – school and sporting teams with overlapping memberships – presented me with very real issues about how to position myself so that I could be effective in both without compromising either.

TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SPATIAL MAP

When developing a blueprint for leadership, Caldwell (2000, 1) named areas "in which leaders should concentrate their efforts, domains". The term is particular apt for the development of a spatial map because the fundamental purpose of it is to provide a tool to help teachers to create "self generated support" by framing their thinking in particular areas.

There are three domains of and for identity forming and framing in the story I have outlined about my selection, appointment, and initial introduction to the country town that became my place and space of work and living for six years, which form the basis of the spatial map.

The first domain is 'the personal'. This refers to teachers as persons, their history and experiences of life, their relationships with a partner (if applicable), family and friends, their beliefs and values, their material wealth and belongings.

The second domain is 'the professional'. This domain comprises education and training, employment as a teacher, the role and expectations of being a teacher, behaviour patterns and standards associated with being a teacher, including positions on various issues like war, drugs, religion and politics, and the ability to do the job of being a teacher.

The third domain is 'the public'. This is the being in community dimension of a teacher in a rural context. It is a very broad and mixed domain that includes things such as participating in a service club, attending a particular church, playing sport, shopping, and taking a stand on issues that could become controversial, like mining in a national park or land rights.

Being a teacher in a country location and particularly one with a small population is invariably an experience of being known of and about by more people than you know of and about. There are many message carriers and mediators about teachers and their behaviour. In other words, the places and spaces that teachers use, occupy, and move through in small country locations are subject to frequent surveillance and, conversely, there is little anonymity afforded them. This complex situational context gives rise to a need to ensure that teachers have ways of maintaining, and, if necessary, renewing their capacities to optimise their effectiveness in the light of perceptions of them formed in contexts other than teaching and schooling.

The three domains described above – 'personal', 'professional' and' public'– are not presented as the "complete picture of a teacher's world". However, from my experience, they are potentially useful ways of grouping or clustering things that teachers in rural and remote places have to

juggle, balance and weave or, more formally, manage, in order to survive and to progress their careers and their personal aspirations.

The domains are not presented for consideration in terms of size and scope dimensions, though it is argued there is variability in terms of intensity and impact between them that typically occurs when contexts change. The professional domain can assume a high profile for a teacher because it embraces a significant amount of a teacher's time. It is the domain that typically has the most impact on how a teacher comes to be known in a small population context that is, through what people think of them as **a teacher** first, and then as a private person, and so on. However, there may be exceptions to this, such as when a teacher is a long term resident of a small rural community and may have grown up in it. The personal attributes and dispositions of a teacher, in essence, therefore precede the professional presentation and from this there is a real sense in which the local context plays an important prior role in constructing 'the teacher'.

The spatial map conceptualising works when a teacher consciously activates the three domains I have described when they are in contexts where opinions of them are likely to be formed. In rural places these are many and varied and, in addition to the school, include shopping, attending a doctor's clinic, playing sport, participating in a town festival or social event and visiting friends. It provides a tool for assessing and integrating what is being said and done as well as the other kinds of cues relating to the characteristics of the context and, most importantly, assigning priority to what domain or domains should be foregrounded in terms of any responses that are made, which subsequently may impact on their ability to be an effective teacher.

A relevant illustration of what I am trying to describe would be a teacher who has tertiary qualifications in science, teaches the theory of evolution, and attends a church where some members are known for their creationist beliefs. The teacher is asked to speak at a Christian church meeting on Intelligent Design and whether it should be included in the local school's curriculum. Another illustration would be a teacher coming to a view that the viability of class sizes is jeopardising standards and is therefore inclined to propose that certain subjects are discontinued or offered by distance mode. A third is proposing that the school take a public stance on an issue that has gained some profile in the media and is growing as a focus of political activity when it is known that the parents who support the school have divergent views on it.

In each of the brief illustrations from the perspective of an individual teacher, how to position self to optimise the capacities required for continuing to be an effective teacher, is a critical matter. Experience shows that if this is impaired in a context where visibility is high and anonymity is low, it can be a particularly hard struggle to rebuild local credibility and confidence as a teacher. It is here that the spatial map can be useful for working through events and issues that have the potential to be formative in terms of how a teacher is considered and valued as well as how the individual considers and values themselves.

The spatial map can assist with assessing what priority is allocated to each of the domains in shaping a response or position in relation to an issue because it is dynamic and is intended to be used as an infinitely variable tool that expands, contracts, intersects, or remains stable according to the demands of the contexts under consideration. Should the professional domain be the dominant one through which things are processed, or should the processing comprise a blending of all three, which is expressed in ways that leave opportunities for other modifications to stances to be made over time? The map provides a conceptual tool to assist teachers to weigh the arguments and the evidence being placed before them and then to position themselves.

Issues and events that I have briefly outlined above are complex and, as such, will invariably elicit a range of views and positions. The teacher as a key person in a rural context, needs to be aware of this but also needs a mechanism or a process for managing the competing as well as the consensus generating aspects of the issues. Fundamentally the accent on '*the spatial*' is in terms

of deciding what balance and blend of the domains is appropriate and, very importantly, what space – what reserve capacity – is needed to enable teachers to continue to build their capabilities as teachers and to maintain connections in and with the local community while also having some actual privacy entitlements.

SUMMARY

Rural and remote contexts, while providing many unique and challenging opportunities for teachers both professionally and personally, are also inherently highly complex. This is primarily because of small and thin density populations and a suite of characteristics that place significant value upon informal relationships and appreciation of local knowledge. For teachers, small communities can accentuate their visibility and lack of anonymity and, frequently the transient nature of their appointment. The contextual factors and the profile factors together require knowledgeable and skilful negotiating and navigating by teachers to ensure that they retain the capacities needed to be an effective constructor and manager of student learning.

The spatial map that has been sketched out in this article based upon personal experiences and ideas from Soja (1996), with its focus on framing, monitoring, managing interactions and locating oneself spatially so that there can be said to be "always room to move", in thinking and action is a potentially useful form of self support for teachers living and working in small rural and remote places.

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