

Learning in environments and the need for global positioning systems

Goele Cornelissen, Maarten Simons & Jan Masschelein
(K.University Leuven)

In the social regime of government, governmental reflection focuses on the state in relation to a number of analogous, disciplinarian settings such as the school, the factory and the hospital. In these settings people have a *position* as normalized individuals and there are fixed patterns of interaction between these settings. This modern organization of time and space no longer functions as a horizon for governmental reflection nowadays. Instead, advanced liberal governmentality focuses on individuals as entrepreneurial selves that are *moving* in environments or networks in which human capital can be employed, can circulate and can offer an income. In this paper we will focus on what it means to look at oneself as *moving in an environment* and how it opens up a space in which it becomes meaningful to reflect upon learning (indeed in which ‘learning’ can appear as absolutely necessary), in which we experience a constant need for information and in which all kinds of global positioning systems can become important governmental technologies.

The point of departure is no longer that people inhabit a society with particular norms, rules and habits but inhabit environments. More particularly we can hear and read for example that schools are no longer to be seen as institutions but as stimulating and facilitating learning environments. It is tempting to conceive of ‘(learning) environments’ as yet another concept to name the habitat of students and human beings in general. Based on a brief mapping of the past and present organisation of time and space, we will make clear that understanding the world as an environment cannot be disconnected from a particular self-understanding: an environmental self-understanding which is totally different from an historical consciousness or self-understanding. This ‘environmental self-understanding’ or regarding oneself as inhabiting an environment – as we will exemplify in the case of the school and family life – has different implications.

First and foremost, what is being stressed when referring to an environment is the ‘here and now’: an environment is an outside that puts challenges and needs here and now and offers opportunities or resources here and now. To regard oneself inhabiting an environment implies that one’s self-understanding is focused on present capacities and opportunities (e.g. competencies) to meet present challenges and needs. Of paramount importance are the capacities and resources that one has at one’s disposal. Therefore it is indispensable to have transparent and up-to-date information on what is available here and now. As we will elaborate this environmental self-understanding implies particular conceptions of the past (that loses its dimensions, and is condensed as it were to one point) and the future (that appears as a calculation to be conceived in terms of opportunities and limits of the ‘here and now’). Moreover environments are experienced as a network connecting points in different configurations. Of major concern within a network are no longer localisation nor extensiveness but *placement*. Placement is determined through coordinates within a network, based on the relation between points and can be described in a formal way in series, rosters and diagrams. Finally, within an environment that puts challenges and offers resources and opportunities ‘learning’ becomes of outmost importance in order to survive and to meet ones needs.

In the paper, we will elaborate more particularly what it means to move around as students, or better, ‘learners’ in a ‘learning’ environment. In a strict sense, within a learning environment the idea of a (normal) ‘position’ no longer makes sense. A learner is in movement or involved in a process to accumulate competencies in order to satisfy learning

needs. These learning needs correlate with the chosen learning trajectory, the phase in the learning trajectory, prior learning outcomes and personal preferences. Contemporary students are regarded as all having unique needs and foremost (stimulated and simulated) learning needs. Individual needs are normative nowadays and these needs are variable and relative.

In learning environments, tests and reports change for continuous assessment and feedback. These instruments offer a snapshot image of someone who is in movement and they accompany someone who is involved in an ongoing process. As such, in her unique trajectory the learner is no longer in need of surveillance and normalising instruction but is in need of permanent monitoring, coaching and feedback. For the student who is managing or steering her own learning process, self-knowledge is about information: information on the required competencies to have access to a learning environment, on the expected learning outcomes, on the required time investment; informative manuals or instructions in order to (learn to) manage the learning process; information on the added value of competencies obtained elsewhere and information on the supply of learning environments. But also information on model or successful trajectories, on the average time investment and on the market value of (combinations of) modules is necessary for the contemporary pupil.

So there is a need of permanent information for permanent orientation in learning environments. What is required is a concentration of this kind of information in a system of permanent monitoring. In an environment one has to know everyone's movements and needs at any moment. This 'environmental' monitoring has a particular aim. The aim is no longer to know oneself as a student in relation to a particular standard/norm, in view of a societal destiny/position and on the basis of a normalising judgement. Self-knowledge instead is about the endless accumulation of learning outcomes and about the in-between 'trade balance' of learning investments. The reference level for this balance is the previous phase in the individual learning process. Therefore, each student is for herself the biggest competitor, and, being the norm for oneself, everything always can be better or different. Averages and marks can still be useful here, but they have a particular function. Information on averages functions as 'benchmarks' and can inspire and motivate students in their self-competition: 'where do I stand in comparison to others?' This is where the competitive notion of 'excellence' enters the scene and where the need for all kinds of global positioning systems appears.