



## Book Review

### “Erudition and urbanism: colloquial learning in the city”

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*McFarlane, Colin: Learning the City, Knowledge and Translocal Assemblage, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 232 pp., ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-9282-8, € 71.90, 2011.*

Colin McFarlane’s *Learning the City: Knowledge and Translocal Assemblage* is an innovative and provocative addition to the geography field. McFarlane offers a unique post-structural approach tackling the complexities of the amorphous term “learning” from a variety of theoretical and empirical angles. His argument is that cities learn in a myriad of ways, be it through transnational advocacy groups, learning forums or individual ingenuity. His approach opens up a new perspective on erudition merging diverse concepts from cognitive development and behavioral studies with urban studies. McFarlane argues that every city dweller has the ability to learn of, with, and for the city. In so doing, he confronts the spatio-temporal aspects of learning by debunking conceptualizations of learning and knowledge within a particular place or time. This non-governmental and non-territorial approach moves the literature forward by concentrating on the cognitive and explorative processes within the city.

As the book progresses from processes of individual learning to translocal urban forums, McFarlane exposes the city as a place of incremental learning in which stratified, unequal and unmediated information becomes central to urbanism itself. The book focuses on five aspects of the learning process – the abstraction of learning, the ordinary aspects of learning, translocal learning, the bearing of environmental factors on learning, and geographies of learning. In six chapters, *Learning the City* takes readers from India to Brazil to South Africa, weaving multifaceted, intricate theories with creative anecdotes of slum dwellers and street children. In the process of exploring both the individual and collective aspects of learning, McFarlane reveals the ways in which local incidents are reflective of greater social and political practices of learning.

Building on the debates around travelling urban policies and the substantial body of literature on policy circulation, McFarlane reasons that learning is distributed among people, materials, and the environment. These arguments utilize literature from business management, cognitive development and organizational development to interpret the urban fabric. Instead of the usual emphasis in the urban policy mobility discourse, which focuses on the manipulation of knowledge, McFarlane modestly asks, “What is learning?” and “How is it differentiated from knowledge?” Whereas knowledge is tangible and generally rooted in space and time, learning emerges through human practice and connections and is thus only generally affixed to the city. Knowledge is the outcome and learning is the process. McFarlane distinguishes his research from those on policy circulation and policy mobilizers by depicting the learning process as produced by and in everyday urbanism.

McFarlane’s contribution not only adds to the urban policy mobility scholarship but also unsettles it through his provocation that the “city is an assemblage for learning” (p. 14). He calls into question such modernist notions that the city as a unit can learn, reasoning that the learning is not mechanized and standardized; rather, it is an unregulated process performed by autonomous individuals and groups according to need and opportunity. For McFarlane, learning emerges through various voices, interests and expectations, translating and coordinating a multitude of information, including preexisting knowledge, across asymmetrical power structures, and creating possibilities from the impossible. Knowledge is ingrained in the interaction and participation in community and is similarly self-reproducing. By denying that policy circulation and learning occur in a linear fashion, McFarlane uncovers the spontaneous nature of the city.

Under such notions, the city is neither a cohesive unit nor an array of individuals; McFarlane interprets this dialectic through the notion of assemblage through which the city is an

agglomeration of experiences that when combined becomes an entity greater than the sum of its parts. His interpretation of assemblage considers not just the agency of each learner in the city but how the totality augments the possibilities for learning, without compromising the value of each individual. By way of example, McFarlane draws comparison between the assorted composition of a house in a favela in Sao Paulo and the builder and occupier. He uses this heuristic and others to present the process of learning as incremental. Both the house and its occupier are agglomerations of local circumstances and yet when connected, create something greater than each individually. Where others overlook the agency of the individual, McFarlane refocuses on the individual, claiming that his learning process is fundamental to how the city as an assemblage learns. Rather than assuming these processes to be more progressive or authentic, he uses these explorations to further academic understanding of the concept of assemblage as an expression of learning.

Perhaps McFarlane's greatest contribution to academic scholarship is through his investigation of incremental learning that is assembled colloquially. Be it through considerations of a ceiling concocted from found objects in a slum in Sao Paulo or through conversations with vagrant youth living and working in the railway station in Mumbai, McFarlane uncovers the nature of learning as experiential and guided by practice. Contemporary urban policy mobility is presented as more than just power elites networking at a conference or workshops promoting international policy models; instead, knowledge, ideas and practices are translated through the idiomatic processes of tactical learning. For Sao Paulo slum residents and Mumbai street children, the city is a contested space filled with obstacles. Yet incrementally and by experience, they learn the city and, as such, how to navigate the hardships – the slum dweller turns discarded material into a home and the street child becomes an entrepreneur. Such endearing stories of self-preservation provide an intriguing twist on the usual policy-related explorations of the city. These bottom-up anecdotes expose learning as far more complicated than a conference or consultation, revealing that the nuances and fluctuations of learning are as varied as urbanism itself.

As the book progresses through social movements and learning forums, the analysis turns towards ongoing discussions on urban policy mobility. McFarlane's main argument questions notions of temporality, which assume learning to be a contemporary practice linked to globalization that has accelerated recently and continues to hasten. In considering notions of "presentism", McFarlane takes an historical approach by exploring the translation of governmentality in Colonial Mumbai, postwar reconstruction in Berlin and revanchist practices in New York and Sao Paulo. He strengthens his contention against "fast policy" by addressing the transformation of policy circulation from a radial practice between the metropole and colony, to a political practice within architectural styles, to an aspect of municipalization and

global relationships. McFarlane provokes readers to question the temporality of learning. Is there a window of opportunity in which learning is more probable? Do certain local factors create a fertile context for policy transfer? Do such arguments give too much agency to spatio-temporal factors? These thoughts are worthy of further consideration.

By exposing the methods through which ordinary people learn in ordinary ways, McFarlane removes the elitism or extraordinary nature of urban policy mobility. The empirical evidence in the book supports its theoretical assumptions that the city is composed of unconventional, mundane, continuous learning rather than exceptional moments. Neither knowledge nor its acquisition can be held and retained but rather continues to assemble and mobilize. Thus, McFarlane demonstrates that the learning process is constant, continuous and commonplace. These claims fit within the wider discussion of policy mobility but where his exploration is truly groundbreaking is in the application of learning. By arguing that the application of learning is as ordinary as the acquisition of knowledge, McFarlane opens the door for future interrogation of misinterpreted lessons, exchanges of unscrupulous ideas, and unstructured learning.

Interestingly, by focusing on the relational quality of urban learning, *Learning the City* barely touches on the spatiality of the city itself. McFarlane argues that learning occurs generally in space but is not confined to any particular place nor is it the result of certain qualities of the city. Cities become spaces of learning because of their density, diversity, and demands and, as such, exhibit similar characteristics regardless of location. McFarlane ignores the specificity of each city by arguing that the urban experience is not garnered by riding the train but by interacting with commuters, and through these social processes, people learn urban performances and its expectations. More precisely, learning is understood as an unspoken pragmatic progression in which people incrementally and subconsciously adjust their behavior to their local conditions. This is not to say that everyone learns the identical urban rituals but rather that practices are similar across spaces. The city itself is therefore anachronistic in McFarlane's interpretations of learning as long as the learning takes place within an urban environment.

*Learning the City* is a critical academic contribution useful for scholars of the field. I found it particularly useful for my research on policy circulation of Bus Rapid Transit concepts through the South African city. McFarlane's focus on colloquial learning and his distribution of agency to a variety of city dwellers was particularly compelling in reference to my own research that focuses on how those with various forms of power learn and adopt new policies. His focus on the individuals and associations represents a critical and useful turn for future inquiry. While *Learning the City* is probably too sophisticated for younger readers, it is sure to become indispensable for academics of the discipline.