

Educational Practices in the Margins: A De Certeauian Perspective

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This article maintains that educational practices can be significant in the current pedagogical environment if conceived as practices of the margins. I will start by recalling a personal anecdote showing that meaningful educational practices often take place in liminal spaces and such marginality can be interpreted as a source for significance. Then, I will discuss two different conceptions of marginality—those proposed by Ivan Illich and Michel de Certeau. The teacher's marginality will emerge as a creative force that thrives because of its position of powerlessness.

Keywords: marginality, Illich, de Certeau, schooling, tactics.

Pratiche educative ai margini: una prospettiva de certeauiana.

Questo articolo sostiene che le pratiche educative possono essere significative nell'attuale contesto pedagogico se concepite come pratiche dei margini. Inizierò richiamando un aneddoto personale che mostra come le pratiche educative significative spesso si svolgano in spazi liminali e come tale marginalità possa essere interpretata come una fonte di significato. Successivamente, discuterò due diverse concezioni della marginalità—quelle proposte da Ivan Illich e Michel de Certeau. La marginalità dell'insegnante emergerà come una forza creativa che prospera grazie alla sua posizione di impotenza.

Parole chiave: marginalità, Illich, de Certeau, scolarizzazione, tattiche.

1. *Introduction: writing from the Teacher's Lounge* Paragraph title

It's noon, and my classes for the day have ended. Settling into a chair in the teacher's lounge, I hastily grab a bite to eat before opening my laptop to begin writing this paper. Despite the bustling sounds of students chatting, running, and laughing echoing through the corridors—a sure sign of their lunch break—I struggle to shake off the lingering thoughts of the school morning. Transitioning into the mindset for writing can be challenging, especially when I remain within the school environment. Nevertheless, I try to collect my thoughts and I begin to tap on my keyboard, but when I start writing I get caught by the weird feeling of being part of two worlds simultaneously. I am at school – I can hear it, smell it, and see it, as my senses are here – but I am moving towards the academia as well, as part of the ongoing conversation on the topic I want to write about. I even start questioning my professional subjectivity at this very moment. Am I a researcher who happens to write in a school or am I a teacher who is trying to give an academic form to their practices? What kind of institution is authorizing me to speak? Where exactly I am writing from?

Like many of my colleagues, I utilize the teacher's lounge during after-school hours for various purposes: writing, reading, conducting research, or engaging in discussions with fellow educators about teaching methodologies and pedagogical approaches. While physically situated within the school building, the teacher's lounge assumes a unique role compared to other classrooms or spaces. It serves as both an extension of the school and a departure from it simultaneously – and it sounds as a corroboration of this character that the teacher's lounge I am in now is located just next to entrance door. The teacher's lounge acts as a nexus where educators come together to refine their practices, share knowledge, and collaborate on ideas. It is a space where the outside world permeates the school environment, bringing in fresh perspectives and experiences. In essence, the teacher's lounge embodies a marginal space within the school ecosystem – a place where professional growth and intellectual exchange thrive. The teacher's lounge is in a sense like a window, an element of the school's space although representing an opening over the outside (Dussel, 2018).

The school's primary spaces – the classrooms, laboratories, gyms, and the like – form the backbone of its educational environment. In contrast, the teacher's lounge possesses a distinct and somewhat peripheral character,

where something different unfolds. It serves as a portal within the “educational cave”¹, offering a glimpse into a realm where alternative activities occur.

At this very moment, the teacher’s lounge represents for me a liminal space between two distinct spheres: the school and the university. Although I am physically present in the school, my thoughts are immersed in academic research. Moreover, as a schoolteacher with an academic background, I find myself professionally occupying a liminal space between these two institutions. In my current role, I endeavor to bridge the gap between theory and practice, navigating the intersections between academia and the classroom.

As a consequence of occupying this liminal position, I am aware that my paper may seem unconventional to both academic and general audiences. It will delve into research topics, undoubtedly, but it will also be influenced by the ambient sounds of the school’s corridors, so to speak. It will not merely recount specific classroom practices, yet it will not solely engage in abstract academic discourse either. Instead, I aim to remain faithful to my in-between status and “write on the margins” (Terdiman, 2002), as French theorist Michel de Certeau might suggest. Along with the risk of being misunderstood, nevertheless, I can sense a particular freedom embedded in the “third space” (Serres, 1991) I am dwelling. Between two very structured institutional spaces and their corresponding discourses – the school system and the university – lies a liminal space where unexpected connections of ideas and practices can happen. Metaphorically speaking, from the teacher’s lounge some radical novelty can spread.

In this unconventional paper, I will begin by exploring my own position of marginality as a springboard to discuss the concept itself. Then I will introduce the different conceptions of marginality proposed by Michel de Certeau and Ivan Illich. From this comparison marginality will appear as a force of renewal. I will finally argue that marginality, with its inherent radical weakness, harbors the potential for creativity and innovation within educational practices. In today’s educational landscape, dominated by neoliberal “learnification” discourse (Biesta, 2005), educating on the margins of institutional and discursive norms can serve as a pathway to emancipatory education.

¹ The expression refers Jan Masschelein’s perspective on schooling as an experience of detachment from the everyday world to concentrate solely on studying (Masschelein & Simons, 2013).

2. *Marginality as micro-resistance: Michel de Certeau*

Between the realms of school and university, I find myself occupying a marginal position. I inhabit a space distant from the institutional center. This prompts me to ponder: what does it truly mean to be marginal? Identifying something as marginal necessitates acknowledging a dichotomy between a central locus and a periphery, thus recognizing a hierarchical relationship between the two. Which “centers” am I considering in this context, and what are the characteristics I attribute to myself as a “marginal”²?

To address these inquiries, we could draw upon the insights and experiences of several scholars and educators from the 20th century. French philosopher Simone Weil, for instance, despite her devout Catholicism, chose not to directly involve herself in the Church’s affairs. Instead, she maintained a position of voluntary marginality, enabling her to immerse herself in the lives of the poorest and most disadvantaged. In doing so, one of the century’s most eminent philosophers embraced marginality as a prerequisite for understanding reality from its most vulnerable vantage point (Greco, 2023). Some great educators from the past century have shown similar sensibilities. Lorenzo Milani’s school of Barbiana – one of the mostly known experiments in emancipatory education in Italy – was made possible by Barbiana’s distance from the city centers and, consequently, from the civil and religious authorities. Lorenzo Milani was certainly not enthusiast in the first place about being sent to a little village in the Tuscany mountains, but such condition of isolation is one of the conditions that made his educational experiment possible (Gesualdi, 2020). Similar considerations can be done regarding Mario Lodi or Danilo Dolci’s teachings, all developed in marginal environments and thriving in such condition.

Among other examples, some attention should be devoted to the works

² The term “marginal” in pedagogy and educational studies is predominantly associated with situations of social exclusion. Research on “marginality” within these fields frequently engages with subaltern studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial theories (Zoletto, 2012; Brisset, 2020; Borg *et alii*, 2002). Such research often conceptualizes marginality as a cultural and material condition of inferiority affecting certain groups, with education playing a pivotal role in addressing and overturning this inferiority to foster equitable relationships among diverse identities and backgrounds. However, in this article, I aim to propose an alternative understanding of marginality.

by French social scientist Michel de Certeau (1925-1986). Eclectic historian, anthropologist and theologian, de Certeau has worked on the margins of different disciplines³ and spaces⁴, making marginality a specific of his intellectual trajectory. Nevertheless, identifying a definition of marginality in de Certeau's works is not an easy task. Defining concepts was certainly not a preoccupation for de Certeau, more interested in identifying how alterity is at work in different systems and situations than he was in straight definitions and precise conceptualizations. We could though read some meaningful passages without looking for a straightforward definition but rather following a trajectory of thoughts helping us to think "the" margin and "on the" margin, and to apply such "marginal thinking" to our educational environments.

Let us read firstly a passage from the collection of essays *Culture in the plural*:

Today, institutions are made more with emigrants than with part-timers; travelers are more numerous than harbingers of nostalgia. The prophet Ezekiel, who was an able poet of the language of imagination, at this juncture furnishes us with a "vision" that now acquires a different – but always formidable – meaning. He lived a time when Jerusalem, crushed by the Babylonians, was under the yoke of deportations, and when the citizens who were spared believed themselves part of the elite because they remained inside the sacred walls. The prophet saw the chariot with its four cherubim carrying the "glory" of Jehovah fly over the Temple and leave the city (Ezekiel 10-11). The Spirit left the walled confines. [...] Today something similar is happening. An exile is in the works (de Certeau, 1997, pp. 7-8).

³ Trained as an historian of modern mystic, de Certeau later developed several different interests in anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis and theology. His was among the founders of the Lacanian *Ecole Freudienne* in Paris and had meaningful contacts with all the French cultural establishment of the 1960 and 1970. According to most de Certeau's scholars, the interest in alterity is the core question around which all his intellectual efforts were built (Buchanan, 2001; Zemon Davi, Giard, 2016; Petit 2020).

⁴ Michel de Certeau was a devoted traveller. He initially joined the Society of Jesus because he dreamed of becoming a missionary (following the example of some eminent Jesuits like Matteo Ricci). He was never sent abroad as a missionary, but as a scholar he travelled extensively through Europe and Latin America (he was especially fond of Brazilian and Mexican cultures). In addition, from 1978 to 1984 de Certeau was appointed as a visiting scholar in San Diego, California (Dosse, 2002).

Reflecting on contemporary institutions, de Certeau underlines that none of them seems capable of fulfilling individuals' quest for significance. Political parties, schools, nation-states, and religious organizations appear to have lost their credibility and authority to organize people's lives. Consequently, the majority of the population—at least in Western societies—wanders on the margins of institutions, seeking the sense of meaning they no longer find in institutional centers. Marginality is today a condition of the majority, writes de Certeau in the preface of one of his major works, *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority (de Certeau, 1988, p. XVII).

As the first quote suggests with a biblical metaphor, the meaning that was once protected within institutional walls (the “glory” of Jehovah hidden inside the Temple’s walls) has left and is now wandering in the city. Institutional powers still exist and determine many aspects of the individuals’ lives, as de Certeau clearly states following Foucault (Bocchetti, 2015; Biancotti, 2004). However, the majority seeks meaning on the margins of these powers, relying on a myriad of acts of micro-resistance. To be consistent with the metaphor, the Temple’s walls are still there but Jehovah’s glory has left and the faithful are wandering around to chase it. One example of this phenomenon – already identified by de Certeau in the late seventies – is the growing interest from western people in Asian religions and spiritualities (Willet, 1983). Such interest represents according to de Certeau a “theatralization” of existential demands that are not met by traditional institutions. Consequently, people search for the meaning they lack through an “exile” on the margin of their traditional beliefs.

This clash between institutional powers—shaping everyday life but incapable of filling it with meaning—and acts of micro-resistance in the margins—building ephemeral space of meaning and individual affirmation— is described by de Certeau with the terms strategies and tactics⁵. These two

⁵ These terms are among the most widely known theorizations by Michel de Certeau, and the literature on these concepts is wide. Useful introductions to this dichotomy in the

terms sum up the dialectic between power and resistance, but also—and that is the most interesting aspect for our current argument—between institutional power and marginal resistances. The quest for individual meaning on the margins of institutions is according to de Certeau a form of micro-resistance to institutional demands. For instance, anticipating the post-colonial vague of the late XX century, de Certeau saw in the use of French language made by former colonized people a form of tactical resistance. Martinican French, the different forms of African French are all example of individual affirmation by colonized people that do not refuse the institution of French language as a whole, but they rather build spaces of micro-resistance. This is best visible, again according to de Certeau, in French schools, where a clash between the supposed “purest” form of language is thought but the “impure” language is widely used by foreign pupils (de Certeau 1979; 1986).

To summarize: according to de Certeau marginality is a condition of the majority, characterized by a quest for meaning that materializes itself as wandering on the margins of institutions⁶ and practicing acts of micro-resistance. It is worth noting that according to de Certeau marginality implies in a sense recognizing the existence of a center or, more precisely, recognizing forms of authority—even if they are not fulfilling the quest for meaning. Being on the margins is creative and subjectifying as long as it entails some relation to a center: without some reference – even in a negative form – to an authority marginality falls into chaos⁷.

3. Marginality as refusing institutions: Ivan Illich

In 1969, de Certeau published an article enthusiastically describing the cultural work undertaken in the Mexican city of Cuernavaca by the Center for Intercultural Dialogue on Development (de Certeau, 1969). The center,

general economy of de Certeau’s works can be found in Highmore (2006), Lampugnani (2023) and Rovea (2022).

⁶ An important analysis of the significance of the metaphor of wandering – with a particular focus on the institutional transformation of the catholic church – can be found in Benjamins (2018).

⁷ In a collection of essays on the May ’68 riots, de Certeau’s notes exactly this risk in the student’s protests. As long as students have an authority to detach themselves from they are culturally and politically creative, but if they are not able at some point to build some alternative authority their demand will just slowly turn into chaos. See de Certeau (1994).

founded in the early 1960s by the Austrian priest and social scientist Ivan Illich, operated for several decades as a hub for counter-cultural development. It hosted researchers and activists focused on spiritual renovation, ecology, and justice⁸. De Certeau describes Illich as someone who “traces paths that do not resemble anything else” (de Certeau, 1969, p. 440), pointing Illich as an example of marginal micro-resistance.

One of the mostly known Illich’s ideas is certainly the proposal of deschooling *society* (Illich, 1972). Ivan Illich’s concept of deschooling society critiques the institutionalization of education and advocates for the dismantling of traditional schooling systems. Illich argues that formal education perpetuates social inequalities and stifles individual creativity and critical thinking. He contends that schools function as instruments of social control, reinforcing existing power structures rather than fostering genuine learning. To counter this, Illich proposes the creation of decentralized, learner-driven networks that facilitate education through voluntary and collaborative means. This radical rethinking of education challenges the conventional paradigm and calls for a society where learning is integrated into everyday life, free from the constraints of institutionalized schooling⁹.

Consequently, we could state that according to Illich, marginality implies a strong critique of institutional powers. Illich’s critique towards institutions, indeed, is way more radical than de Certeau’s. In *Deschooling Society*—but also in other books like *Tools for Conviviality* (Illich, 1973/2001) – the creative marginality proposed entails refusing the very idea of institutionalization in favour of an anarchic exchange of knowledges and experiences among people. In order for marginality to be truly creative – according to Illich – the only way is to refuse institutions and build free networks, be them for learning, for spiritual growth or for material necessities.

⁸ The life and works of Ivan Illich are described in detail in Todd Hartch’s *The prophet of Cuernavaca. Ivan Illich and the crisis of the west* (Hartch, 2015). The author brilliantly follows the thread that links Illich’s life with his works, thus using his philosophy to clarify his life and vice versa.

⁹ Illich’s ideas have been recently brought up in the scholarly discussion about the future of higher education. The radical critique of institutionalization is obviously strictly linked to the contestant cultural atmosphere of the ’60 and ’70, but Illich’s core ideas are still relevant to the educational debate. See for instance the extensive bibliography in Marin *et alii* (2018).

Despite de Certeau's positive judgment on Illich's philosophy, such radical refusal of institutions was not received by the French Jesuit. Even biographically Illich and de Certeau reflect their differing approaches to dealing with institutions: Illich renounced to his priesthood in late 1968 to pursue his career as a free intellectual, while de Certeau remained a Jesuit priest until the very end of his life¹⁰. These different choices are sustained by different conceptions of institutions and creative marginality: Illich's radical critique calls for a refusal on institutional powers and for a free circulation of knowledge, while de Certeau was convinced that the most could be achieved by dwelling on the margin of institutions, taking advantage of what its power has to offer to individual creativity.

We could now ask ourselves, going back to the introduction of this paper: is marginality 'educational' in the sense it is conceived by Illich and de Certeau? Is being 'marginal' in education a creative condition as a micro-resistance or better as radically critical position?

4. *Conclusions: schooling as a marginal practice*

Masschelein and Simons write in their *In defense of the school: a public issue* about the role of the teacher as follows:

The teacher as a pedagogic figure and a master both devoted to and well versed in her subject. But also a master who makes the conscious choice to remove her craft or business from the productive sphere, where it still has a clear return, in order to engage it and offer it fully and exclusively as subject matter (the subject for the sake of the subject, the craft for the sake of the craft) (Masschelein, Simons 2013, p. 113).

Although the authors do not explicitly use the concept of marginality, their description shows some overlap with this idea. Indeed, the teacher, as someone who loves both their subject and their students, inevitably positions themselves on the threshold of different institutions: the university, the school, and other professional groups, particularly in the case of teachers of

¹⁰ Nevertheless, de Certeau experienced some heavy disagreements with his superiors, especially after the publication of his controversial book *Le christianisme éclaté* (de Certeau, 1973) about the crisis of the Catholic Church.

technical subjects. This liminal position highlights the teacher's role in navigating and bridging these institutional boundaries, reflecting a marginal yet crucial position within the educational landscape, as stated in the introduction of this paper.

According to both de Certeau and Illich, marginality can be conceived as creative, provided it involves a condition of weakness and detachment from institutional centers. The differing conceptions of marginality proposed by these scholars can be helpful in further reflecting on the marginality of education. Considering the current discourse of "learnification" (Biesta, 2005; Simons, Masschelein, 2006) or the "tamings" (Masschelein, Simons, 2013) that schools in Western societies are experiencing, the marginality of teachers can still ensure some independence and freedom. Teachers occupy marginal spaces as they withdraw their knowledge from market-oriented goals to serve new generations¹¹. When teachers "suspend" (Lewis, Friedrich, 2015) the sense of their knowledge to allow pupils to experience it, they creatively inhabit an institutional margin. Thus conceived, the practice of schooling is inherently marginal: schooling, according to the authors cited, represents the very act of detaching knowledge from its institutional centers to pass it to the new generation so that they can "begin anew" (Masschelein, Simons, 2013) with it¹².

The two versions of the concept of marginality proposed by Illich and de Certeau present notable differences when considered educationally. Illich's conception remains thought-provoking, as it encourages teachers to be attentive to the subtle influences cultural institutions exert on individuals. While some aspects of the utopian vision of deschooling may seem outdat-

¹¹ The critique towards market-oriented values in education is becoming a sort of obliged starting point for every discourse in the field of theoretical pedagogy today. Influential works in critical pedagogy such as Giroux (2011) and Baldacci (2019) contributed to this. Nevertheless, different discourses are emerging that try to avoid the classical critical-dialectic posture to explore affirmative ways to conceive education outside the so-called neoliberal paradigm. Some significant examples are Biesta's (2010) proposals of a *value-based education*, Masschelein and Simons (2013) idea of *scholé*, Vlieghe and Zamojski's (2019) *things centered pedagogy* or Thoilliez's (2019) conception of education as *craftmanship*.

¹² One of the core pedagogical ideas by Masschelein and Simons consists in the conception of schooling as the act of "beginning anew" with something. This means that schooling is not about passing information of practices to the next generation, but rather about giving them the occasion to experience freely and eventually to change the elements of the world they inhabit.

ed, it continues to serve as a stimulus to avoid the “stultification” (Rancière, 2009; Biesta, 2017) that educational institutions can induce. Conversely, de Certeau’s ideas on marginality merit re-examination and attention. Viewing the school’s marginality as a collection of tactical acts of micro-resistance is valuable for reconsidering the role of education in contemporary societies. Avoiding both a market-oriented vision of education and a captivating but sterile anti-establishment stance, de Certeau’s thoughts regard marginality as a force for renewal. According to the French Jesuit, the fragile position of being marginal unveils unforeseen possibilities for both free subjective formation and the renovation of institutions themselves¹³.

¹³ See also Séradin (2017) for an extensive reading of de Certeau’s concepts of *strategy* and *tactics* from a pedagogical point of view.

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