Reimagining Spaces for Learning in Higher Education
Andrew Middleton
Reimagining Spaces for Learning in Higher Education
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Reimagining Spaces for Learning in Higher Education

Andrew Middleton
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Palgrave Teaching and Learning

Reimagining Spaces for Learning in Higher Education

I welcome this excellent and eminently usable contribution to the Palgrave Teaching and Learning series, designed for all who care about teaching and learning in higher education. The series has the express aim of providing useful, relevant, current and helpful guidance on key issues in learning and teaching in the tertiary/post compulsory education sector in changing times. Texts in this series address a range of essential teaching and learning imperatives, with a deliberately international focus, and a determination to offer practical advice and ideas, grounded in scholarship. Many of the books in this series are written or edited by UK National Teaching Fellows, recognised for the excellence of their teaching, and Andrew received his award in 2016. His pragmatic and scholarly approach, that secured his award are evident throughout this book which also includes invaluable case studies by NTFs and others. The themes represented here are of wide currency across numerous higher education communities of practice including those engaged with communities of learning, Open Educational Resources and connected learning approaches, and it explores new territory in relation to learning environments, social learning, social media and, centrally, reflection as a means of advancing professional practice.

This globally-orientated book provides useful pointers for those wishing to develop innovative approaches.

I am delighted to welcome this addition to the Palgrave series, and I warmly commend it to readers.

Sally Brown
September 2017
Preface: Where do you learn?

Pause a minute. Ask yourself, ‘Where do you learn best?’

If there is anyone close-by, ask them ‘Where do you learn best?’ Ask anyone that question, including students and teachers, and then ask, ‘And how do you learn?’ and you will find that individuals tend not to have a list of their favourite lecture theatres or classrooms, but will instead tell you about trains, beds, gardens, offices, and many other places and situations. Humans learn continuously and they like learning. We are innately resourceful and adaptable. In many ways, this book is a consideration of that. It seeks to understand the many meanings of learning space as lived space experienced in the course of learning.

Reimagining Spaces for Learning in Higher Education is for anyone who is involved with university learning spaces in any capacity, but particularly those who think higher educational spaces could be better and who want to do something about them. It explains what student-centred learning is; the basis for understanding learning space. In doing so, it takes a holistic view of learning space, challenging binary perceptions. It argues that our appreciation of learning spaces comes from exploring their complexity and that designing space without a good understanding of the experience of learning is futile, costly and potentially undermining to progressive thinking about excellent teaching and excellent learning.

The text draws upon the literature and uses case studies to make connections across converging trends towards establishing examples of good emerging practice for the digital-social age. The term ‘digital-social age’ is used to emphasise the significance of social disruption as a socio-digital maturity develops. The case studies reflect a convergence of emergent thinking and practice from the different contexts being examined and are diverse in nature. They report on the experiences of academic innovators, students, and staff with roles in facilities management, IT, and educational development and are integrated within the chapters to provide lenses to support the examination of the topics being discussed.

The book examines space and its relationship to learning in a digital-social age, and it finds evidence of a new learning paradigm that connects across physical and digital experiences and beyond formal conceptualisations of provision. From this it develops an ‘imaginary’ (Mansell, 2013) for a hybrid learning space.
Acknowledgements

I thank my partner, Cilla Ross, for her constant support, patience and interest. She has ensured that the ideas discussed here have been given the room they have needed.

The ideas for Reimagining Spaces for Learning in Higher Education came from my own experience of learning and scholarship, beginning with my undergraduate experience of studios and, latterly, my experiences of more familiar teaching spaces and learning situations. I have learnt enormously about learning space from peers who have taken part in the many Media-Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group events and the co-production of its publications since 2008. Notably, Jethro Newton, Alex Spiers, Graham McElearney, Chrissi Nerantzi, Sue Beckingham, and Carol Beattie, and all those many people who I learn with continuously through social media networks including #LTHEchat.

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues and students at Sheffield Hallam University, who always inspire me, some of whom have supported me to develop several of the case studies here. They represent academic innovators everywhere. I would like to thank my close colleagues, especially Graham Holden, Sinead O’Toole and Anne Nortcliffe, who have supported and challenged me while writing this book by working with me on real-world problems to rethink what learning space in higher education means.

The case studies in this book tell many stories and behind each one, there are many others. It has fascinated me how each story has connected to and reinforced so many of the other accounts in the book. Each one gives a glimpse of the commitment that academics, professional service staff and students have for developing their learning space. Thank you all for agreeing to let me share something of your commitment.

Thank you to Sally Brown for being inspirational, supportive and patient as series editor and Helen Caunce at Palgrave who has guided me through the process.
SECTION 1

New spaces in the learning landscape
This chapter introduces *Reimagining Spaces for Learning in Higher Education* and its exploration of how learning and space work together in the digital-social age towards a conceptualisation of a hybrid learning space (Stommel, 2012). It considers how the lived learning experience is affected by the built and digital context and how we, as teachers, students, managers and developers, must look more closely at space to ensure learning remains engaging, challenging and relevant to the development of knowledge, lifelong capabilities and habits.

It aims to challenge binary conceptualisations of learning and space to instead develop an appreciation of their continua and crossing points that together generate the nuances affecting learning space (*Fig. 1.1, New spaces continua*). It will, for example, consider how the physical coincides with the digital, and the relationship of formal to informal space, where institutionally provided space overlaps with the learner's own conceptions, construction and use of space. It will compare the roles of the teacher and learner, hierarchies and networks, and the implications of this for learning, teaching, spatial design and its management.

![Figure 1.1 New spaces continua](image-url)
Through scrutinising the intersections and boundaries of practice and learning, ideas about learning and space become richer. Learning is experienced ecologically and dynamically. This points towards a fuller conceptualisation of a lifewide and connective learning experience. A chasm between space that is conceived, built, managed and provided, and space as it is experienced through learning, becomes stark. It shifts learning space as a significant contextual matter affecting the design and quality of teaching and learning engagement into the foreground and it plays down conceptions of learning space as a matter of managed facilities. Learning space becomes a consideration for the academic and the learner, with consequences for lifelong success.

The navigation of hybrid learning spaces and the development of learning habits in a dynamic digital world require learning capability, agility and confidence. Conceptions of hybrid learning space for the digital-social age emerge through the book’s case studies, in which the use of technology and media are shown to be pervasive. Similarly, self-determined, co-regulated and autonomous learning come into focus to create a sense of new experiential learning space. In contrast, learning and innovation is shown to have been suppressed by the promise of provided institutional monolithic technology, tarnished by its ongoing and consistent failure to invigorate learning; only to manage it (Maloney, 2007). The back story here is that the art of teaching and the joy of learning remain under the influence of layers of misconceived infrastructural investment.

The book restates proposals for an educational learning paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and an appreciation for situated cognition (Brown et al., 1989), and in the context of connectivism (Siemens, 2005) and networked learning (Bilandzic & Foth, 2017; Cronin et al., 2016) it reconsiders and develops the learning paradigm for the digital-social age.

### 1.1 The digital experience

*The fundamental reason to pursue technology rich learning environments is less open to debate: we live in a digital world.*

(Istance & Kools, 2013, p. 55)

Throughout the book I refer to ‘the digital’, meaning an experience influenced by ubiquitous technology and the pervasive presence of digital media and connectivity. The digital affects our lifewide behaviours, habits and expectations, and learning spaces must reflect this. The case studies in this book, the literature referred to throughout, and our own
individual experiences of the world, all reflect a digital-social age that inevitably reshapes us. This world is remarkably different from the one that was familiar even at the turn of the century when ‘the Internet’ was still largely ‘other’, rather than lived. Now, our digital and social connectivity is an essential, seamless part of our life context.

Despite this, I argue that higher education’s engagement with it remains largely superficial. We have not properly understood what the digital context means for learning. In higher education, technology has had a reductionist rather than an expansive tendency: in general, we have not learnt how to experience knowledge differently, only how to deal with it differently. This has contributed to the persistence of a content-centred, instructivist and deterministic higher education paradigm which seems impossible to escape.

This is changing, however. The case studies show how some students gravitate towards social media spaces for learning of their own volition and demonstrate how supportive peer networks satisfy the interpersonal connectivity they need. Even so, some are more reticent and this highlights the challenge facing educators where a more fluid, hybrid and digitally enhanced conception of space is needed. This is not about digital skills; technologies are generally usable these days. It is more about our difficulty in reimagining and disrupting our expectations for higher education at a pace commensurate with the needs and possibilities of a digital world.

Our challenge in higher education, then, is to reset the learning stage and develop a shared appreciation of the possibilities afforded by a physical–digital hybrid learning space.

1.2 Academic innovation

Rethinking learning space means rethinking and transforming academic practice; that is, not just what we do, but who we are as academics. The case studies remind us that real sustainable change is hard won by academics who work within and who are knocked back by systems that are slow to accommodate emerging good practice. Stasis is compounded because on-the-ground innovation in academic practice is often developed in isolation and with little consideration, knowledge or experience of what is needed to influence the development of organisational infrastructure. As is discussed in Chapter 6, ‘Being an academic innovator’, innovators often sit apart from and work around systems, being perceived as ‘mavericks’ or even ‘outlaws’ without credibility. It is essential, however, that ways are found to involve academic innovators – not just to share practice, but to contribute to remodelling teaching culture.
In talking to academics and students about innovation, as evident in the case studies in this book, it is ironic that our most inspirational and celebrated teachers are forced to work around our systems to develop the student-centred and active learning spaces they need. They tend to innovate and succeed *despite* the structures they are given. The value of committed and creative academic innovators should not be underestimated.

1.3 Disrupting assumptions about space

Space is a problematic term, hard to nail down and having many meanings. Turnbull (2002) has categorised these meanings as discursive, cognitive, existential and material space. The best understanding of educational space may come from exploring the connections between these meanings.

We tend to uncritically accept formal institutionally ‘provided space’ as a familiar, non-threatening backdrop to teaching and learning. For example, we accept walls as necessary delimiters of space; think of learning as an individual challenge rather than a collective opportunity; and ignore the vertical, digital, social and temporal dimensions of the spaces available to us.

**Box 1.1 Being acceptant**

Users of the physical formal space tend to accept

- dominant teaching walls as being a defining feature of a classroom;
- the purpose of walls as being to enclose learning and disconnect it from other contexts;
- classrooms as systems designed to fit student numbers to square meterage rather than as spaces for action;
- construction materials and methods as being irrelevant to learning, even though the ambient conditions and the constraints they impose upon classroom adaptation define engagement;
- digital, spatial or temporal connectivity as being a matter for ‘other’ people with other expertise and not a matter for, or the responsibility of, teachers or students;
- the symbolism of monolithic lecterns in classrooms that separate teachers and learners, and the implication of this for the function of the space;
- rudimentary inflexible, uncomfortable and worn furniture as an acceptable reality of a well-used space and of a different order of importance to out-of-date or insufficient course content;
- inadequate natural and artificial lighting and ventilation, even though tired teachers and students do not perform well.
The list goes on, but these points and others clarify the need to develop a critical and holistic appreciation of learning, space and the implications of built pedagogy (Monahan, 2000) and the agency of the classroom itself (Lambert, 2011).

Learning space is experienced space and is not neatly delineated. Learning space, therefore, like the design of the curriculum, should not be understood as separate and purely functional (even when our job is to provide functional space), but as authentic and reflecting the world beyond campus. If nothing else, learning space design must challenge the discourse that investment in learning space is primarily targeted at prestigious landmark ‘brochure’ buildings; what Neary (2015a) calls ‘campus porn’.

1.4 Hybrid learning space – a hypothesis

This book proposes that there are many positive, disruptive and converging influences that together challenge traditional conceptions of higher education learning space. The changing nature of learning space demands that educators reconceive the nature of learning and academic practice in the following ways:

- Experiences situated within, across and beyond bounded learning spaces disrupt traditional dependencies on enclosed spaces and models of formal delivery;
- Learning networks disrupt dependencies on learning hierarchies;
- Smart personal technologies and social media disrupt dependencies on institutionally provided learning space;
- Rich, experiential and active learning disrupts dependencies on content-centred models of teaching.

These propositions are positioned in combination alongside examples of real practice to challenge assumptions about learning space in higher education.

1.5 Theoretical underpinnings

This book draws upon a wide-ranging literature that includes learning theory, teaching practice, digital learning, academic literacy, innovation, sociology, anthropology, higher education, and learning spaces. Within each of these, learning is located as a recognisable and relevant matter, rather than one that exists separately as a subject of scholarship (Gourlay et al., 2014).
The concept of learning paradigm in opposition to instructional or content-centred paradigms (Barr & Tagg, 1995) is fundamental to a reconsideration of learning space, as is the significance of situated cognition addressing the ‘profoundly misleading, theoretical separation between knowing and doing’ (Brown et al., 1989, p. 2). The tenet that ‘knowing (not just learning) … is inextricably situated in the physical and social context of its acquisition and use’ (ibid) is a key principle towards reconceiving learning spaces.

During this discussion, we will refer to connectivism (Siemens, 2005), situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), authentic learning (Herrington, 2006), learning ecologies (Brown, 1999) and heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2013), for example. These ideas and others describe learning as a vibrant experience connecting learning with life. This learning is not abstract, but real, habitual and ecological.

In-betweenness, third spaces, third places, and interstitial spaces are introduced in Section 1 of this book. They are non-dominant learning spaces, borderlands and boundaries which are, nevertheless, often the richest experiential learning spaces. Shortt (2014, p. 2) calls these ‘everywhere’ spaces; those neglected workaround spaces which are used, experienced and valued nearly every day and which symbolise the grittiness of learning across the non-formal space. Understanding the in-between use of boundary spaces, for example, helps us to understand the significance of that quick glimpse at the personal device; that look that confirms that the digital can no longer be understood simply as a different or ‘other’ functional space. Quite suddenly and exponentially, the digital has become integral to our experience of any space. It is this, in particular, that signals the inadequacy of binary discourses about learning spaces: it is evidently not enough to organise learning around simple dominant notions of space when the aim of higher education is to develop knowledgeable, critical, creative, resilient and agile people.

The digital creates a constant pervasive and augmented learning experience. Its presence illuminates, and can re-situate, learning as an independent and social lived phenomenon that happens within, beyond and across education’s notional boundaries. It makes the hybrid seamless experience of learning obvious. Throughout the book, I do not talk about ‘e-learning’, ‘technology-enhanced learning’, or ‘virtual learning environments’, nor do I use other nomenclature that problematises isolated technological phenomena. Our interest is learning in the post-digital era, meaning ‘the normalisation of the digital in almost all aspects of activity’ (White, 2015). The phenomenon of the digital as being a distinct space has gone now and an aim of this book is to observe the emergence of new normalities in
which digital augmentation, enhanced by social media and socially situated personal smart, connected technologies, heightens our sense of learning engagement.

Finally, if it is desirable for spatial borders to be disrupted and for learning to enjoy the benefits of authentic, open networks and contexts in which cognition is situated, what becomes of higher education? The case studies suggest that understanding the quality of learning space, understood as contexts created for dedicated learning experiences, is becoming significant for learners and teachers alike, demanding our urgent attention.

1.6 Developing agility and confidence

Higher education is facing many challenges and opportunities relating to the exponential growth in global demand for a university-level education. Economic downturns, new modes of delivery and engagement, changes to student funding, a crowded provider market and conflicting ideas of quality all create instability for traditional providers and the need for innovative thinking (Barnett, 2013; Brennan et al., 2014; Barber et al., 2013; Davidson & Goldberg, 2009). Barnett (2013) argues that the public debate on the future of the university, just when ideas are needed, is hopelessly impoverished. Universities he says are too inclined to focus on the local, despite new global possibilities. He argues for imaginative ideas that offer alternative possibilities, whilst retaining the idea of university as a defender of public values.

Higher education is not good at reinventing itself as is evident from the discussions above on transformation and academic innovation. As has been seen in other sectors, this may prove fatal. Barber et al. (2013, p. 2) in An Avalanche is Coming argue that ‘the obvious strategy – steady as she goes – is doomed to fail; the one thing you don’t do in the path of an avalanche is stand still!’ These commentators, and others, say reinvention is critical if current providers are to survive the next decade. They argue that the survivors will be those who relinquish homogeneity and discover their distinctive character and offer. Business managers will respond by thinking about the spread of their portfolio and strategies for its contraction or expansion. Innovation in the design and delivery of the learning opportunity, especially as higher education embraces its global context, has a critical part to play in reformulating the idea of a higher education.

Students need to develop capabilities that will make them confident and agile in a world that is unpredictable and that demands critical and creative
engagement. This requires universities to do more than certify that students have done their ‘seat time’ (Wagner & Compton, 2012); surface engagement is not enough. Educators need to create opportunities, and spaces therefore, in which each student learns about themselves. Learning spaces need to allow students to develop their abilities, confidence and fluencies to make sense of their lives and succeed, giving them the wherewithal to keep learning through life. The holistic design of learning spaces as sites of action will be enhanced by the accommodation of diverse, authentic, exciting and challenging experiences.

### 1.7 Beyond technology enhancement

In times of change we need to be transformative in our thinking. Future thinking allows us to put to one side what we believe to be true, to imagine what is possible. Luz (2008, p. 1) notes how the benefits of reimagining ‘our environs and settings [can] have as agents for change, interaction and reflection.’ However, if we look at the use of technology as an example of an enhancement discourse, the dominant narrative is still about how universities persuade their academics to use institutionally provided technology, how to be efficient, and how to give students what they expect. A more meaningful challenge to the academic, surely, is one that sets expectations for:

- inspiring and challenging the learner;
- designing learning that matters because its outcomes make a difference;
- requiring the student, with the support of peers, to make important learning decisions based on what they know, what they learn, and what they determine to find out;
- allowing the learner to discover themselves through critical thinking and creativity;
- requiring the learner to take risks and explore boundaries in their thinking and actions;
- offering experiences that are open-ended, socially situated and based on discourse;
- learning experience that is at least as meaningful and memorable as the factual, procedural and conceptual knowledge it develops.

Such experiences are likely to involve technology, but they are not about technology. They are about reinventing the ways students achieve intended and unintended learning outcomes.
Higher education must reimagine, reconceive and remake its institutions, roles and innovative practice in terms of ‘radical, positive change’ (HEFCE, 2009, p. 8). By drawing on the examples set out in the case studies, we can redraw our conceptualisations of space for learning; space that is now characterised by the connectivity of the digital-social age.

### 1.8 Co-ordination and complexity

Reflecting on my own experience of leading a reconsideration of learning spaces at my own institution, I know that a transformative discourse is dependent upon connecting and challenging the interests of diverse stakeholders. Learning space development either connects understandings or falls between them. Ellis and Goodyear (2016, p. 150) acknowledge that there are ‘great gulfs between the working practices of the main stakeholders’ and suggest it is unlikely that a single unifying model for managing learning spaces will be found. We must go out of our way, therefore, to make positive connections with associates.

This diversity, even cacophony, of discourse is important in itself (see case study no. 6, René Meijer); as is finding a way for each of these interested parties to connect their interests. The real interest represented here

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**Box 1.2 Disruptive external contexts**

A report into *Future Work Skills 2020* (Davies et al., 2011) identified the confluence of six big, disruptive shifts that are likely to reshape work in the near future. The authors argue that universities, like any other organisation, should consider the implications of:

- **extreme longevity** – increasing global lifespans change the nature of careers and learning;
- **computational world** – massive increase in sensors and processing power make the world a programmable system;
- **rise of smart machines and systems** – workplace robotics nudge human workers out of rote, repetitive tasks;
- **superstructured organisations** – social technologies drive new forms of production and value creation;
- **new media ecology** – new communication tools require new media literacies beyond text;
- **globally connected world** – increased global interconnectivity puts diversity and adaptability at the centre of organisational operations.
is not only wide, but also deep: it tends to be the minutiae that reveal the design attributes of effective learning space. It is not only the academic voice that matters in discussion about spatial design; progress in developing learning space is dependent upon all of these stakeholders being engaged properly. The reality of space-related change is that people need to work co-operatively, and this takes good leadership (e.g. Harrison & Hutton, 2014; Neary et al., 2010; Temple, 2007). In my own work on developing learning spaces I have found it is the people on the ground who are good at finding and making connections, but they need the reassurance of their managers to step beyond their day-to-day boundaries. Co-operation can be established by taking time to co-produce design principles to discover and agree what is important.

1.9 The use of case studies

The 24 case studies in this book create a complex picture of interests, energies and experiences relating to learning spaces, their use, development and management. They have been selected to be a room full of diverse voices, each with insight and experience to share.