Chapter 57

Student Mentors in Physical and Virtual Learning Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the human element in the learning space through the notion that once a learning space is inhabited, it becomes a learning place of agency, purpose and community involving both staff and students. The School of Languages and Learning at Victoria University in Melbourne has initiated a multifaceted peer learning support strategy, 'Students Supporting Student Learning' (SSSL), involving the deployment of student peer mentors into various physical and virtual learning spaces. The chapter discusses the dynamics of peer learning across these learning space settings and the challenges involved in instituting the shift from teacher- to learning-centred pedagogies within such spaces. Both physical and virtual dimensions are considered, with the SNAPVU Platform introduced as a strategy for facilitating virtual learning communities of practice in which staff, mentors, and students will be able to engage in mutual learning support. The chapter concludes with calls for the explicit inclusion of peer learning in the operational design of learning spaces.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to initiate a discussion around a critical parameter in the design and implementation of learning spaces: the learners who inhabit these spaces. Too much attention has been focussed on the architectural design and the technological infrastructure as opposed to the learners who inhabit these spaces. We suggest a reframing of discussions concerning the design and development of learning spaces toward one concerned with the development of learning *places*; peopled, positioned and purposeful. Harrison and Dourish (1996, p. 69) posit a distinction between notions of space and place, in that "we are located in 'space', but we act in 'place'"; so, "a space is always what it is, but a place is how it's used". Learning spaces can be understood to

possess particular affordances that "encourage or constrain behaviour" (Hunley & Schaller, 2006, p. 32), while the agents interacting with and within such a space possess particular capabilities for action or interaction themselves (Ingold, 1992, p. 46). Consequently, what Hunley and Schaller (2009, p. 34) identify as the "reciprocal interaction between a learning space and its users" may be understood as an ongoing negotiation and interaction between the affordances of a space and the capabilities of its users engaged in the participatory processes of transforming *space* into *place*. As Harrison and Dourish (1996, p. 70) conclude: a "sense of place must be forged by the users [and] cannot be inherent in the system itself", it can however be "designed for"; in other words, "a space can only be made a place by its occupants... [t]he best that the designers can do is to put the tools into their hands" (p. 74).

This chapter explores the human element in the learning space and focuses on learners and on peer-to-peer pedagogies within a variety of learning spaces. At Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, the School of Language and Learning employs a range of strategies to enable students to support other students in their learning, including peer mentors in traditional classrooms and student rovers in the Learning Commons. We are also in the process of developing a virtual peer-learning platform, SNAPVU, based on a synthesis of Web 2.0 technologies. Together, these strategies form a new learning support initiative, 'Students Supporting Student Learning' (SSSL). Through an exploration of these peer learning support strategies and the spaces within which they operate, we suggest that a peer-learning approach may unlock the potential affordances of physical and virtual learning spaces as environments facilitative of student learning and engagement. This approach provides a visible and practical link between learners and teachers by providing voice and agency to: student mentors, peers or near-peers who can mediate the joint processes of community building and knowledge making.

Peer Learning Pedagogy

Peer learning is defined as "students learning from and with each other in both formal and informal ways" (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001, p. 4). It is influenced by constructivism, specifically, in Vygotsky's (1978) key concept of the "zone of proximal development"; that is, "the distance between the actual development as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Peer learning has at its heart the principle that students can effectively assist other students with their learning. Van der Meer and Scott (2008) argue that peer-assisted learning approaches are particularly important for first-year tertiary education and call for "shifting the balance from an instruction focus of learning support staff to facilitating or supporting peer learning" (p. 73). However, as Boud, et al. (2001, p. 3) point out, "[p]eer learning is not a single, undifferentiated educational strategy. It encompasses a broad sweep of activities." Such is the case at Victoria University, where a variety of peer learning and peer mentoring strategies have been combined within the overarching strategy of Students Supporting Student Learning (SSSL).

STUDENTS SUPPORTING STUDENT LEARNING (SSSL) AT VU

This chapter explores the dimensions of peer learning at Victoria University's School of Language and Learning in the context of various university learning spaces: a faculty-wide Peer Mentoring program, a Student Rover program in the multi-campus Learning Commons, and the virtual learning support platform SNAPVU. Each of these programs operates within different physical or virtual learning spaces, and each presents its own challenges and opportunities with respect to the affordances of peer learning in these spaces or places.

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