

Chapter 1

Distributed Learning Spaces: Physical, Blended and Virtual Learning Spaces in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines distributed and personal learning spaces across the spectrum of physical, blended and virtual learning spaces in the higher education context. We suggest that higher education is no longer defined by tangible boundaries of a 'physical campus' but by the entire student experience, whether that involves negotiating the physical corridors of the campus, attending face-to-face classes, participating in fully online courses or a blend of both face-to-face and online courses. In addition the student experience may also involve connecting to virtual environments from home, a local cafe, on the train or participating in professional practice hundreds of kilometers from the physical campus. This chapter attempts to account for the diverse range of spaces that are enriching the learning and teaching experience for both academics and students and suggests the need to recognise the changing nature of learning spaces in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are no longer defined by the physical boundaries of their campus but by the entire student experience, whether that involves negotiating the physical corridors of the campus,

attending face-to-face classes, participating in fully online courses or a blend of both face-to-face and online courses. In addition to the formal institutional physical and virtual spaces utilised by staff and students, the informal physical and virtual spaces may now encompass a wider range of distributed learning spaces. These distributed

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learning spaces could involve a complex web of on-campus experiences, connecting to virtual environments from a variety of locations such as home, a local cafe, on the train or participating in professional practice hundreds of kilometers from the physical campus. Distributed learning spaces recognise that we are seeing a disintegration of the distinction between face-to-face learning and teaching and distance education. There is increased recognition that learning does not just occur in the formal university setting but increasingly at work, home and within the community and that the principles of lifelong learning are being embraced by society. There is also a proliferation of approaches emerging including 'flexible', 'open', 'distance' and 'off-campus' that assist the ubiquity of learning in a wide range of contexts (Lea & Nicholl, 2002).

The blurring of face-to-face learning and teaching and online learning is a significant shift for both students and staff of universities. This disintegration of the distinction and the growing acceptance that learning occurs in different 'places' presents both exciting and challenging opportunities for higher education. The recognition of blended and flexible learning is significant for traditional face-to-face institutions as well as distance education universities. For the purposes of this chapter the premise that flexible learning provides *opportunities* to improve the student learning experience through flexibility in time, pace, place (physical, virtual, on-campus, off-campus), mode of study (print-based, face-to-face, blended, online), teaching approach (collaborative, independent), forms of assessment and staffing is accepted. It may utilise a wide range of media, environments, learning spaces and technologies for learning and teaching. "Blended and flexible learning" is a design approach that examines the relationships between flexible learning *opportunities*, in order to optimise student engagement and equivalence in learning outcomes regardless of mode of study (Keppell, 2010).

The growing acceptance of life-long and life-wide learning also have a major influence on distributed learning spaces. Lifelong learning encompasses both formal and informal learning, self-motivated learning, self-funded learning and universal participation (Watson, 2003). There is growing acceptance and recognition of life-wide learning in informal settings. "The idea of life-wide learning is proposed to highlight the fact that at any point in time, for example while a learner is engaged in Higher Education, an individual's life contains many parallel and interconnected journeys and experiences and that these individually and collectively contribute to the ongoing personal and potentially professional development of the person" (Jackson, 2010, p. 492). We can no longer assume that school leavers are the major demographic group that universities need to cater for as mature age students are increasingly represented in higher education settings. We can also not assume that all students will desire the campus experience for their learning and that many students may choose flexible learning opportunities to suit their life circumstances which may mean that they do not physically visit the university campus.

This chapter recognises the ubiquity of spaces that are enriching the learning and teaching experience for both academics and students and suggests that we need to begin by exploring the pedagogical interactions and considerations that are possible in distributed learning spaces. This chapter will begin with an examination of the role of the university, the utopian university in relation to learning and teaching, and the ecological university (Barnett, 2011). Secondly we will examine the assumptions and principles underlying higher education. These assumptions and underlying principles form the default basis for making decisions about learning and teaching in the higher education environment. Thirdly, pedagogy needs to be examined to understand the nature of distributed learning spaces. Fourthly, rather than lecture halls with rowed seats being the predominant physical space

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