Chapter 3
Beyond the Look:
Viral Learning Spaces as Contemporary Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors argue that a disjuncture has emerged between the look of learning spaces within learning spaces discourse, definitions of learning spaces, and the aspirations of learning spaces as a design concept that transforms higher education. Using Visual Studies methodology and photographs, the chapter contrasts the hegemonic look of learning spaces with a viral learning space – learning that is not designed or controlled by the institution. The authors argue that the Learning Spaces agenda will fail to transform higher education in the twenty first century if its proponents do not adequately conceptualize lifelong and lifewide learning achieved by learners outside the institution.

THE LOOK OF LEARNING SPACES

In her chapter *Learning How to See*, Obliger (1996, italics added) gives thanks to the Dean of the College of Design at North Carolina State University for helping her to understand that "design is a *way of seeing* things". Grummon (2009) for example, asked his readers to "look around your campus", and

….you'll rapidly discover that students are studying and learning in many places. Visit the library,

a coffee shop, a residence hall lounge, a dining room, and the quad. You'll discover students with books open, laptops humming, and text messages flying — while intensely discussing their views on social issues. The characteristics of these informal learning spaces are ones that need to be translated into classrooms, labs, and other built environments. [1]

Seeing may be physical – the tour of the built environment – but it is often representational using still photographs, floor plans and mud maps. Photographs are used to give 'visual voice' and an "aesthetic lens" (Warren, 2002, p. 224) to learn-

ing spaces within the institution so that others, particularly those sharing ideas on the web, can see (Figure 1). This chapter listens to this visual voice and argues that, even with the exception of images of cafes and students sitting under trees; formal, institutionalized education dominates how photographs see and construct learning spaces. This dominance constructs an aesthetic lens that is blind to learning spaces outside the institution. This is an important blindness, as there appears to be strong agreement that the way in which learning spaces are designed reflects the way in which institutions understand, and respond to, how students learn.

In order to explore this disjuncture visually, we need to explore the way in which people talk about 'learning spaces'. As long ago as 1994, Hunkins wrote of his vision of learning spaces;

I see misty outlines of spaces that suggest unity, integration of knowledge realms, not discontinuity, the atomization of information. I see spaces that suggest prolonged inquiry under the control of students, with teachers as consultants, coaches, guides. I see spaces that allow for emergence and chaos, that give students time and space for developing patterns of meaning, projects.

In it, learning is "under the control" of students, and there is space "for emergence and chaos" (Hunkins, 1994). In their vision for 2020, Miller, Shapiro and Hilding-Hamann (2008) argued "Learning spaces are the new school" and that "in 2020, Learning Spaces will enable people to construct their identities as inter-dependent and inter-connected social beings and on this basis to produce the wealth and community that sustain their well-being". Such an approach will be achieved in two key ways – "(a) the abandonment of the technocratic, hierarchical and exclusive approach to education and skill achievement, and (b) the marginalization of institutionalized learning". In this vision, Learning Spaces are characterized by "permeable, connected, and modular spaces

that enable a wide range of learning, including synchronous and asynchronous, face-to-face and virtual, subjective and inter-subjective" (Miller et al., 2008, p. viii-ix).

According to Siemens (2008, p.1, italics added) learning spaces provide "space for learning that extends *beyond the classroom*". In this space, teaching moves away from hierarchy and classrooms, a pedagogy of participation is achieved, and emphasis is placed increasingly on accreditation rather than content (Siemens, 2008). Brown and Long (2006, p 9.1, italics added) argue that "learning spaces are not mere containers for a few, approved activities; instead, they provide environments for people" and that "learning spaces encompass the *full range of places* in which learning occurs, from real to virtual, from classroom to chat room." Learning spaces include but are not limited to classrooms. For example, Hammons (2008) argued that "learning now takes place wherever the learner is inspired" and that "learning occurs in classrooms (formal learning); other times it results from serendipitous interactions among individuals (informal learning). Space - whether physical or virtual - can have an impact on learning." Recently the University of Brighton proposed that learning spaces involve "the social and spatial practices of post-compulsory teaching and learning within and beyond the built environment" (University of Brighton online, 2010).

Strong general agreement exists that learning spaces are physical and virtual; exist within and outside the institution; engage pedagogy that supports self-direction; engage learners in participatory, collaborative learning processes; are permeable; involve synchronous and asynchronous learning; may be digital; and are designed (by educators as well as learners). They provide a challenge to didactic and mono-directional approaches to education (teacher to learner) in response to "knowledge fluidity" (Siemens 2008, p. 3, ellipses added) where "the world of expert, clearly-defined, and well-organized knowledge formed by ancient philosophers and deciphered by

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