



Learners, teachers and places:

A conceptual framework for creative pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper introduces a theoretical framework which helps educators in higher education to navigate the complex relationships and structures of tertiary education. It is also written for academic developers who support the evolving identities and pedagogies of lecturers undertaking professional development. The framework focuses on students, teachers and places as actors (first space) that interact, giving rise to transformational (second) spaces. At the heart of the framework (third space), all three actors dynamically interact through creative pedagogies for active, transformational learning, physically and/or digitally. Although the term 'third space' typically refers to the merging of two physical places (Flessner, 2014), we perceive it here as a merging of three 'actors' with constantly changing identities to create a dynamic third space for transformation and student-centred learning.

Keywords: educational theory; creative pedagogies; learning and teaching spaces; higher education

Introduction to the Framework

This 'on the horizon' article offers a theoretical framework, which aims to enable educators situating their academic practice, as a basis for engaging in creative pedagogies in higher education (HE). The objectives are to: 1) present a theoretical framework for transformation in learning and teaching; 2) reveal the dynamic complexity of learner-teacher-place interactions; and 3) present creative pedagogies for active learning at the heart of the framework.

We work as senior academic developers and teach on a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) and MEd at the University of Glasgow. While preparing for our 'Creative pedagogies for active learning' course, we developed a framework about how students and teachers interact, and how they are informed by—and inform—the places that they occupy in the learning and teaching process. This was presented to our students to challenge their preconceptions about students, teachers, and the places they learn, teach and assess in.

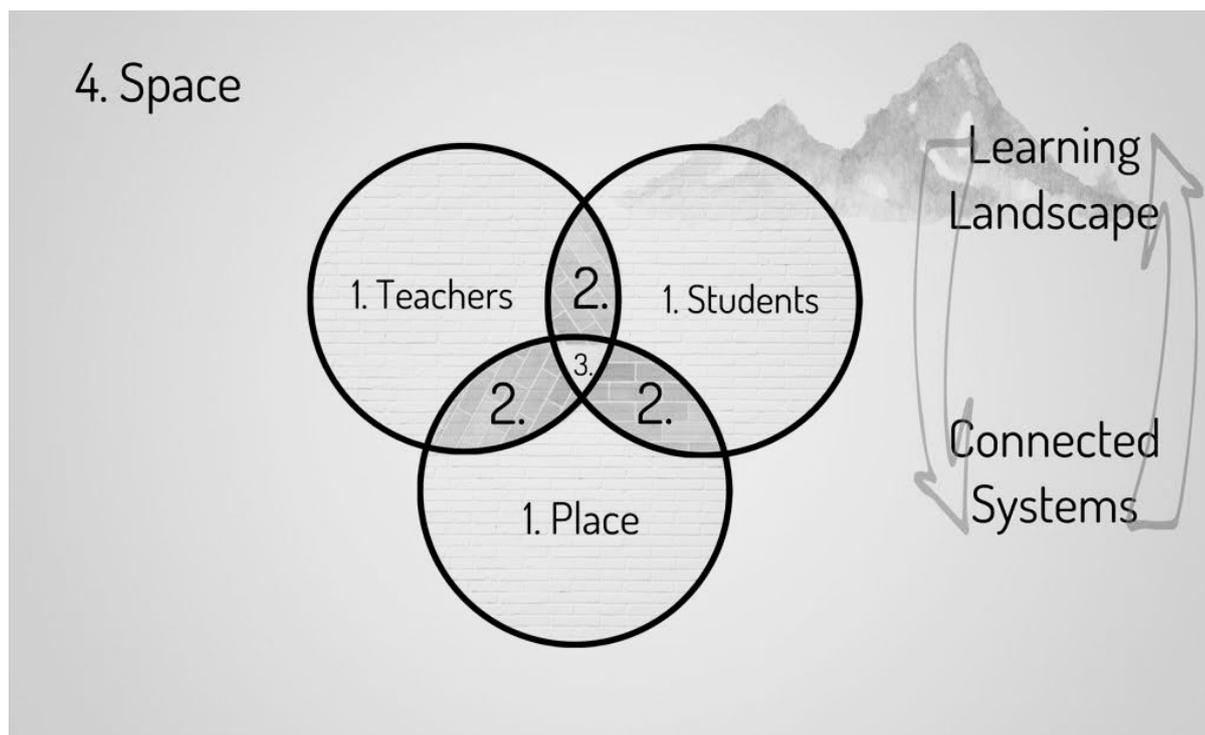
In our roles we have often experienced the tension between academics' values and ideas about teaching, and perceived expectations of how things ought to be done. Teaching is a complex art (Jørgensen, 2018) and science (Laurillard, 2012), and our theoretical framework aims to reflect this, enabling educators to situate their own academic practice within this fluid and transitional discourse. It encourages us to reflect on institutional boundaries and opportunities (Magnússon and Rytzler, 2019), aiming to develop a more equitable learning experience addressing accessibility and inclusion. Beyond wanting to enable disenfranchised learners to be seen and heard, the framework ultimately challenges the structures we are operating in.

Our aim for the theoretical framework is to enable educators to think about themselves, their students, and the places they operate in, as a basis for learning and identity negotiation, and reflect on how these influence our behaviours within different contexts (Hendrix, Jackson and Warren, 2003; Kumpulainen and Rajala, 2017). By creating this opportunity for reflection and discovery, and a chance to empathise (Bali, 2015) with their own learners, we sought to broaden the horizons of student teachers.

The framework (Figure 1) can be visualised as a series of overlapping circles, each of which present a 'space'. In our framework, the first 'space' relates to the individual identities of teacher, student and place (physical or digital). The overlap between each pair is the 'second space'. The 'third space' is the intersection of all three domains, creating a place for growth, liminality and transformation (Illeris, 2014).

The reason for outlining these core dimensions is that knowledge of each area is critical for educators. Unlike traditional positivist notions of science, it is virtually impossible to examine any of these factors in isolation. What is needed is a framework that recognises the continual interactions between these dimensions, and capitalises on these interactions to interpret and enhance learning and teaching practice. We recognise these as 'transactional' spaces (Bridge, 2013).

Figure 1 Representation of the conceptual framework



Space and place

A necessary differentiation needs to be made between the terms of place and space. For the purpose of clarity, place can be virtual or physical rooms or areas that usually have defined boundaries. These boundaries can be spatial, temporal, personal, or social. Space describes two things: firstly, the socio-cultural and mnemonic meaning of a place, and the positioning of individuals (actors) and secondly, the intersections which represent interaction between actors.

We initially explored learning spaces under the distinction of physical space and digital space, and while these boundaries are becoming ever more transient there are still defining characteristics for each. One of the main distinctions which constitutes a significant challenge to recreate in digital places are physical obstacles, such as walls, doors, furniture (Key, Gross and Do, 2008). Learning places can also be informal. Adjunct learning places include parks, museums and cafes, and lend themselves to the idea of the 'third space' (Johnston, MacNeill and Smyth, 2018) where learning institutions can work in partnership with the community to offer 'learning landscapes' (Löw, 2016). Social media also offer a locus for distributed learning and knowledge construction. All these places—digital and physical—should be inherently accessible to learners and teachers. Barriers to participation are exclusionary and negatively impact on the teacher-student-place dynamic.

First space

The first 'space' relates to the actors in this framework: students, teachers, places. They influence—and are influenced by—each other. We understand first space slightly differently to Oldenburg's (Soukup, 2006) classification; this is not the home of an individual as such, but the individual informed by various influences on their identities, from socio-economic background, to gender negotiation. Students and teachers separately bring to the learning and teaching process their varying assumptions, biases, experiences and expectations.

We have also situated place in the first space category, as these in a learning and teaching context are also predominantly designed by people, with various degrees of cultural and monetary considerations having influenced their designs (Kuksa and Childs, 2014). At the same time, these places influence people; architecture, lighting, colours, etc. all impact experiences within a place (Hauge, 2007).

The framework recognises individuality while understanding that the individual does not exist without context, and that behaviour can change depending on context (Keupp, 2020; Lengen, Timm and Kistemann, 2019). Indeed, invisible authors that influence learning and teaching also include socio-political factors such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Research in Excellence Framework (REF), and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), etc. that place a performative demand on these actors (Bainbridge, Gaitanidis and Chapman Hault, 2017; Dixon and Pilkington, 2017).

Second space

Second space defines the interactions between the first spaces; teachers with students, and both groups with virtual and physical places. Three types of interactions or 'transactions' are described here.

Teachers and place

Place influences pedagogy, and vice versa. A traditional lecture theatre commands that students all face the front, in rows, with the teacher acting as the 'sage on the stage' versus the 'guide on the side' associated with classrooms designed to encourage students to work in small groups, for example, where the teacher plays the role of facilitator (King, 1993). Our thinking is that as well as pedagogy, place plays a role in informing academic identity in terms of discipline specific spaces, and institutional culture.

Students and place

As place influences teacher behaviour, so it influences student behaviour. A tiered lecture theatre facing the front implies that students are subdued into deferring to the knowledgeable expert, the lecturer. Digital spaces can be used to overcome the physical boundaries of these classrooms and connect the students with one another (e.g. through classroom response systems or collaborative learning technologies), as long as – just with physical spaces – the teacher attends to a student-centred pedagogical approach. This permits students to negotiate their identities within digital and/or physical spaces, individually and/or collaboratively with their peers.

Teachers and students

A lot of attention has been given to the roles of teachers and students, and the 'approaches' they take to learning and teaching. For example, Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse (1999) revealed that an information-transmission teacher-focused (ITTF) approach to teaching was associated with surface learning, while deep learning was associated with a conceptual-change student-focused (CCSF) approach to teaching.

In recent years, staff-student partnership working has received much attention (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014) and is relevant in the context of our framework in terms of student agency and growth. Here, students are active in co-creating their own curriculum and assessment, although the degree to which they have autonomy in this regard can vary, from non-participation (teachers in control) through tokenism to citizen control (students in control) (Bovill and Bulley, 2011).

Third space

Third space in our framework is more challenging to define; an equivalency that could be used is that third space is the 'being in flow' of all three first spaces coming together optimally. This is the space of transformational learning and possibilities. It is as much space as it is time, a junction in the learning landscape at which the learner has passed through cognitive dissonance. We see this overlapping area as a portal for transformational learning, in the sense that during their individual journeys, learners and teachers regularly experience a 'disorienting dilemma' that encourages them to reflect, adopt new approaches and behaviours, before applying these in practice (Mezirow, 2009).

We understand that this differs from other interpretations of the 'third space' being about learning in informal spaces outwith the boundaries of traditional learning institutions (Johnston et al., 2018). However, there is some similarity here in the sense that in this new third space, we see an egalitarian learning and teaching culture that benefits all actors. Students and staff are more empowered to take control of the curriculum in creative ways, and the places they shape enable these changes.

Applying the framework in practice: Active, transformative learning

Active learning in physical spaces

Recognising the 1st space dimensions as 'actors' in the learning and teaching process, and their varied interactions, leads us to the potential for active learning. With the increased emphasis on active learning in the sector (Hanesworth, 2016), most tertiary institutions are reviewing their existing and new teaching places, in order to design flexible spaces. The traditional lecture hall is being demoted at the expense of active learning classrooms and Technology Enhanced Active Learning (TEAL) rooms that can be used to facilitate collaborative pedagogies, also known as Technology Based Active Learning (Ghilay and Ghilay, 2015). Pedagogies that embrace flipped learning and collaborative learning are well suited to these spaces (Hanesworth, 2016).

Active learning in virtual spaces

As we acknowledge the need for student-centred approaches in physical places, there is increasing awareness that virtual learning environments (VLEs) are largely used as a repository for administrative purposes, rather than to support higher order thinking through collaborative learning and knowledge construction (González, 2012). This has led academic developers and learning technologists to consider the future of the VLE as a more enriched digital learning environment, promoting conversations,

collaboration and connectivity (Phipps, Allen and Hartland, 2018). A focus on transformational digital learning has escalated during the current pandemic, making it necessary to utilise the available technologies as means to meaningfully engage learners, and encourage community building (Maguire, Dale and Pauli, 2020). Meanwhile, there has been a parallel escalation of the student (and arguably staff) mental health crisis (Sahu, 2020). Thus, a conscious reflection about meaningful engagement with these spaces seems a logical consequence for educators who want to encourage student participation, scaffold enhanced learning experiences, and support student wellbeing.

Active learning in blended spaces

Blended learning traditionally makes the most effective use of both classroom and online spaces to enhance student learning experience and outcomes (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). However, in a post-Covid world, interpretations of blended learning may have moved on from an optimal combination of face-to-face and online learning to a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning (Howe and Armellini, 2020). In this flipped learning context, students work through learning resources online in their own time, before engaging in higher order thinking and problem-solving in timetabled virtual sessions such as webinars. Collaborative learning is enabled through webinar features such as breakout rooms, as well as teamworking platforms such as MS Teams. This means that the space for transformation is still there, but creative pedagogies need to be adapted to make most effective use of the increasingly online environment. However, these notions of blended learning may be in flux as staff and students transition back onto—and again off—campus, as circumstances dictate. For example, we are seeing a redefinition of the term hybrid learning to mean the synchronous joining of remote and on-campus learners (Hilli, Nørgård and Aaen, 2019).

Creative pedagogies for transformation

While active, collaborative learning methods have been mentioned in the context of TEAL and online places, our PGCAP course focuses on creative pedagogies that capitalise on the interaction (indeed partnership) between all three domains or actors. When we designed our course (described in detail in Sheridan et al., in review), we wanted to disrupt the barriers between spaces and places. We wanted to create the opportunity for learners to co-construct their learning with us, creating the potential for cognitive dissonance and transformation, where early career lecturers could develop their identities as teacher in creative ways, and 'pick and mix' one or two creative pedagogies from a suite offered that they could apply in their own teaching. Thus, there was a notion of 'meta'- in terms of us illustrating how we could put student teachers into flux in a supported way to encourage them to rediscover possibilities, in a way that they could do with their own students. These creative pedagogies seek to engage students in a way that actively engages their senses: an emotional or visceral experience that has the potential to transform the learner.

- Object-based learning (OBL) for example, enables students, under the facilitation of teachers, to interrogate physical or virtual objects as part of an enquiry-based learning approach (Hannan, Duhs and Chatterjee, 2016).
- In digital storytelling, the learner presents their own story, or presents a researched biography of an individual or event, using multimedia. Digital stories classically have several standard elements (Robin, 2008) and seek to engage the learners through an emotional response.
- In learning landscapes (Kidd, 2015), the learner is encouraged to explore the physical or virtual environment, such as a park, museum or other recreational place.

Online versions of these pedagogies are less visceral but can promote accessibility and inclusion. Ultimately, by offering 'new' creative pedagogies that student teacher could choose from, we used this third space of liminality and growth to provide a space for staff-student-place partnership working, a model which could be cascaded to teachers' own practice.

Take-home message

This paper presents a theoretical framework examining the interaction between teachers, students and place, and the interactional spaces between them. At the heart of the framework, creative pedagogies seek to bridge a dynamic and positive connection between each of the three actors in which ultimately all three are empowered. Future work will investigate staff-as-students' perceptions of the framework in the context of our PGCAP course, informing a larger research paper.

Biographies

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