CREATING TRULY FLEXIBLE LEARNING SPACES: VALUING THE KINAESTHETIC IN LEARNING

Jason Bainbridge, Carolyn Beasley, Mark Carthew
Swinburne University of Technology (AUSTRALIA)
jbainbridge@swin.edu.au, cbeasley@swin.edu.au, mcarthew@swin.edu.au

Abstract

The notion of the classroom as an interactive learning space is most often used to describe that blend of online and physical learning tools such as discussion boards, chat rooms and streamed deliveries. However, postmodern conceptions of space challenge us to think of space as an imagined geography and a form of freedom [1] shaped by more abstract concepts such as identity, experience, and subjectivity. Viewed through this lens, the learning spaces of the classroom become empowered not through technological advances and their various blends, but by the desires and aspirations of the student and teacher. This paper uses the methodology of autoethnography, in which the self and individual narrative is examined as data [2], to map these different kinds of learning spaces through three case studies. The first, a case study in Education, draws on the porous boundaries of the primary school classroom as an example of a physically flexible, subjective, and interactive learning space. This learning space shifts with little resistance from indoors to outdoors, from homeroom to library floor, from chair to grassy oval, music to the dancer and art to the artist. Physical objects became learning tools long before pedagogy embraced the terms ‘realia’, ‘digital natives’ and ‘eLearning’. This idea of the interactive classroom forms the basis of particular approaches in online education and can be used to develop resources for pre-service teachers preparing for education practicums and the design of flexible and inspiring learning spaces [3] and teaching the aesthetic [4]. The second, a case study in undergraduate Media Studies, draws on hooks [5] and Gauntlett [6] to argue that while the theoretical spaces of online learning can offer an effective entry point into learning, they work more effectively when enriched with practical, tactile experiences and performative applications. These are drawn from the material world and include face-to-face teamwork activities, the handling of media materials, puppetry and interview. As such, learning spaces are demarcated between theoretical (virtual) spaces (for broad conceptual thinking and critical reflection) and practical (physical) spaces (for practical application and media production). The final case study, in Writing, draws on Anderson [7] and Andrew’s concept of community [8] as an imagined space to suggest that online PhD students in creative arts expand the space of their classroom by creating learning and sharing communities of fellow students. This recreates what they imagine to be the typical interactive space inhabited by the writer or arts practitioner rather than through the mediated space of the chat room or discussion board. In this way we argue that an understanding of learning spaces and of how to use each of these spaces to its maximum potential, has a profound effect on student learning, on creating a learner-led teaching environment and on student culture more generally. In this way we hope to offer both a new perspective on blended learning and a new understanding of what truly flexible, connected learning can be.

Keywords: eLearning, pedagogy, kinaesthetics, media, writing, learning spaces.

1 INTRODUCTION

When a classroom is described as an interactive learning space, the description most often refers to that blend of online and physical learning tools such as discussion boards, chat rooms and streamed deliveries. However, postmodern conceptions of space challenge us to think of space as being an imagined geography and a form of freedom [1] shaped by concepts such as identity, experience, and subjectivity. Unlike the disembodied spaces of the virtual world, these are concepts that are very much embodied processes located in both the taught body (of the student) and the teaching body (of the teacher). Viewed through this lens, the learning spaces of the classroom become empowered not only through technological advances and their various blends, but also by the desires and aspirations of both the student and the teacher. Here, learning becomes kinaesthetic: embracing a greater understanding of how the taught body receives and responds to stimulus (education) that is then converted into embodied practice (knowledge and understanding).
By placing the physicality of both the student and the teacher - and this kinaesthetic exchange of information/knowledge between them - at the centre of this paper we want to explore how learning spaces can be truly flexible: embracing both the virtual (online) space (for broad conceptual thinking and critical reflection) and the physical (embodied) space (for practical application and production) in educational delivery. This forms part of a larger project exploring kinaesthetics in learning. In keeping with this focus on experience the paper uses the methodology of autoethnography, in which the self and individual experience-through-narrative is examined as data [2], to map these different kinds of learning spaces through three interdisciplinary case studies. The first, a case study in Education, draws on the porous boundaries of the primary school classroom as an example of a physically flexible, subjective, and interactive learning space. The second, a case study in undergraduate Media Studies argues that while the theoretical spaces of online learning can offer an effective entry point into learning, they work more effectively when enriched with practical, tactile experiences and performative applications. The third, a case study in postgraduate Creative Writing, draws on Anderson [7] and Andrew and Arnold’s [8] concept of community as an imagined space to suggest that online PhD students in creative arts expand the space of their classroom by creating learning and sharing communities of fellow students. The paper concludes with a reformulation of what is meant by ‘flexible learning space’ and points to the ongoing work of our larger project.

2 CASE STUDY 1: PARADIGMS AND IMPERATIVES IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

Like many countries and education systems wishing to invest in their infrastructure and capacity to cater for future generations, Australia’s education industry is interrogating its planning for the future by encouraging ‘higher education and training providers to build on quality learning and teaching in schools’ [9]. This imperative, combined with the need to keep pace with adaptive technologies, an aging workforce approaching retirement and identified areas of skill set shortages has created a symbiotic urgency in forward planning. In regard to teacher education, this urgency has a direct correlation with projections of expanding population growth and enrolments in schools combined with decreasing numbers of pre-service teacher graduates [10]. Australian universities and education providers are therefore vigorously competing for market share in teaching and learning spaces in pre-service teacher education.

Recent iterations of Australian National Professional Standards articulate the expectations that graduate teacher educators need to understand and critically reflect on development and learning theory. However there are some potential paradoxes and challenges arising in relation to purely online Educational courses, as learning spaces have long been embedded with notions of humanism and learning through ‘real life’ experience.

By way of example, notions of classrooms as learning spaces shift with little resistance from indoors to outdoors within the pedagogical discourse inspiring the view that ‘natural places (beach, woods, streams, etc.) not only stimulate healthy development but also provide the most playful physical environments for young Children’ [11]. Understandings of play and ‘active learning’ can also move seamlessly from homeroom to library floor, from chair to grassy oval, music to the dancer, art to the artist and in modern contexts, from screen to the listener / viewer. Therefore in the 21st century, pedagogy requires a re-conceptualisation what we mean by ‘active’, a pedagogy that acknowledges both the strengths and limitations of online media in trying to replicate physical experiences of space.

Furthermore, consumer-centric delivery models based around the paradigms of accessible and flexible course delivery catering for younger generations native to digital media [12] also raise questions about expediency as opposed to the quality of experience. A few examples would include: Whether we can we really learn or teach about manipulating clay and art media totally online? Is it important to feel, smell and react to ‘real’ wet paint on the page and to its sensuous inspiration? In what ways do we see, feel and react to the spontaneous works of others around us and how do such interactions affect our learning / aesthetic experience and response? In what ways does online interaction and /or observation share the joy associated with physically touching the page or object or interacting in group games, music, movement and dance? And can collaboration online be less, equal to or more effective than in person?
Such questions reflect the complexity of issues facing teacher training in the 21st century and they have
a long history; physical objects became learning tools long before pedagogy embraced terms such as ‘realia’, ‘digital natives’ and ‘eLearning’; associated kinaesthetic experience underpins both the
music education pedagogy of Carl Orff (embedded with body and sound relationships) and similar
notions of active, exploratory learning that were so important to Fröbel, Montessori and Piaget. While
these ideas of interactive and ‘transformative’ classrooms provide a basis for particular approaches in
online education and can be used to develop resources for pre-service teachers preparing for
education practicum and the design of flexible and inspiring learning spaces [3], they are virtually (pun
intended) impossible to replicate in their entirety online.

Alternative ways of seeing and learning via new technologies have emerged from conversations
surrounding the value of flexible (or blended) learning (mixed mode) as opposed to complete delivery
via online content, interaction and assessment. This comes at a time when Australian universities are
offering an ever-increasing number of courses, degrees and awards across disciplines and in many
cases replacing traditional face-to-face courses with total online delivery. It is only natural therefore
that questions arise surrounding perceptions of difference, quality and authenticity, as Laiken notes
‘creating an authentic, transformative learning environment involves a great deal more than
transmitting a body of content, or even helping learners to attain new skills’ [13]

This is a particular challenge in regard to the fieldwork aspect of professional experience placement,
especially where students are placed in schools with a reliance on feedback regimes outside of
traditional university visitation and mentorship structures. This mentor / student relationship is largely
built on modelling caring and empathic response, critical to all teaching and learning spaces but
especially important for those inhabited by children and adolescents. As Kim and Schallert describe it:

‘Whether by expressing sincere appreciation, showing delight, or recognizing his or her growth, the
acknowledgement of the cared-for of what the one caring is doing is the sustaining force of the caring
relationship. Applied to teaching, caring is not limited to the behaviors or attitude of the teacher, but
necessarily depends on how students respond to their teacher. Built from underlying processes of
engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity, caring is a quality of the relationship that
develops between a student and a teacher, not a characteristic or propensity of the teacher’ [14].

Here then is the essence of this kinaesthetic exchange between teacher and student. Furthermore, it
should be no surprise to find that Australian education ministers have recently signed off on
agreements to regulate and ensure the maintenance of quality assurance mechanisms of mentorship
in pre-service teacher training. This agreement has been predicated on Australian research into
practicum partnerships that has found:

There is a need to understand how a quality professional learning experience is constructed and the
impact of placement experiences on what is learned. Information from research and reviews of
teacher education consistently points to the need for more information about how teachers can be
better prepared in initial teacher education programs. There is a need to understand how a quality
professional learning experience is constructed and the impact of placement experiences on what is
learned [15].

In the pre-service teacher education environment, one of the greatest challenges we face as learning
and course designers surrounds ways of creating authentic online learning experiences in not only the
practicum, but also subjects which have traditionally been perceived as active or ‘hands-on’, such as
physical education, arts, music, drama and even science and mathematics where physical
manipulation of objects is part of pre-service training methodology. Active learning as a well-
established method across disciplines is highlighted by Burke & Smith who provide an archaeologist’s
perspective in regard to higher education:

‘Active learning: in essence any instructional strategy opposed to the passive consumption of lecture
material – incorporates all four modes of learning behavior (auditory, visual, kinaesthetic, and tactile)
to enhance the ways in which students learn’ [16].

As creative arts, media and teacher educators our teaching methodologies are grounded in the
principles of active learning; pedagogy that strongly intersects with contemporary understandings of
aesthetic spaces in arts education. Spaces where that rely on bringing units of work to life through
‘human interaction and understanding that underlies meaningful education’ [17].
3 CASE STUDY 2: ARTIFACTS AND PERFORMANCE IN UNDERGRADUATE MEDIA STUDIES

While undergraduate Media Studies would seem to be more suited to purely online delivery than pre-service teacher education – given its focus on both the screen (in its various incarnations) and technological development, active learning remains an important part of student development. Here, the threat of passivity comes from extensive exposure to the object of study. Today's students are already surrounded by (and often cynical towards) media before undertaking study. Therefore media studies needs to sometimes make both a disjunctive and cognitive break to create the corresponding critical/reflective space on how media operates. Furthermore, training for a career in media often requires knowledge (and handling) of media materials, production of media texts (ranging from pitches and blogs to short films and websites) and, perhaps most importantly in a largely collaborative industry, teamwork. While the theoretical spaces of online learning can offer an effective entry point into learning, they work more effectively when enriched with practical, tactile experiences and performative applications. These are drawn from the material world and include face-to-face teamwork activities, the handling of media materials, puppetry and interview. As such a demarcation occurs between theoretical (virtual) learning spaces (for broad conceptual thinking and critical reflection) and practical (physical) learning spaces (for practical application and media production).

This pedagogical approach to Media Studies is drawn from the works of prominent cultural studies scholars bell hooks [5] and David Gauntlett [6], reconceptualised for the Australian media context. The idea of performative delivery is derived from the writings of hooks [5] on active pedagogy and the engaged voice, for while we traditionally don’t think of academics as performers. In her research, bell hooks speaks of the traditional image of the teacher: ‘behind a desk or standing at the front, immobilized [representing] the firm, immobilized body of knowledge as part of the immutability of truth itself’ [18] – the very personification of authority. In contrast, the engaged voice (as part of the larger systems of active learning) draws on both performance and popular experience to connect with the audience.

Richard Bauman defines a performance as ‘an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience’ [19]. Teaching can be thought of as a performance piece because it is clearly 'marked and set off from ordinary activities' as it occurs in learning spaces laid out much like a theatre in which only certain people (i.e. the teacher and students) are allowed to perform. Furthermore they ‘call attention to themselves as particular productions with special purposes or qualities’ [20] in the way that teachers lay out an argument, or a way of thinking about the world, or dealing with a problem before an audience of students with the aim of educating/empowering them with these knowledge tools. Just like the actors that performance scholar Tuan describes, teachers should therefore become aware of how their bodies ‘form patterns and rhythms” and “command space’ [21] to promote active learning. When a teacher moves, space becomes a ‘kinaesthetic feeling’ [21] for both the teacher and students making the learning space a kinaesthetic space. Such kinaesthetic spaces encourage some sort of involvement or interaction on the part of the audience, allowing these areas to interpenetrate – making the learning experience a truly dynamic, fluid and interactive experience for students.

Nor should this style of learning be unusual. Performance is a vital part of learning in the wider public sphere. The rapid-fire pacing of *Sesame Street* for example, using muppets and modeled after advertising, was found to engage children far more than other formats of early educational television. Similarly in 2002 the hugely successful *Top Gear* television program moved away from straight car reviews to ‘a combination of travel show, car program and science demonstration, wrapped in... comedy’ [22]. Its attention to ‘aesthetics and entertainment’ essentially meant it could cover the same subject matter in a way that was more engaging for its audience [22].

Such a pedagogy is operationalised in three ways: First, by creating performative seminars that engage students with real world examples, humour and performance, creating possibilities for interaction (eg. exploring connotations of gender by role playing what single men as opposed to single women look for when trying to pick up a potential partner at a club). Making the learning performative is part of a larger strategy of involving and drawing on popular experiences that students have been exposed to, to make the unit seem as relevant to them as possible. It recognises that students are exposed to more media than we are, that their attention spans are relatively short and that they remember things best visually, whether that’s a particular idea, a particular media form or a particular media theorist. Therefore two hour classes could use as many as 90-120 powerpoint images *in tandem* with humour and a number of tactile examples and realia (eg. a walkman, a magazine cover,
puppetry, a latex Bert Newton mask) to assist students to remember key concepts. Specific examples, from first year for example, would include changing outfits item by item at the request of students (from formal to informal) to illustrate how we can ‘read’ (theorise) about things like clothing (to illustrate textual analysis), getting students to call out or write down questions and suggestions for the lecture (to illustrate postmodernity’s idea of alternative points of view) and encouraging students to post comments on their Facebook page during a class (while discussing the role of media in the public sphere). Even in a highly theoretical area such as postmodernity, for example, teachers can get students to write down a question or something they would like to see happen during the class. In this way, the learning material is broken up with comments, asides, questions – alternative knowledges – from the students and postmodern thinking becomes, in Kamler and MacLean’s terms ‘embodied social practice’ not just read and learnt but ‘performed with voices and bodies’ [23]. Most importantly, this is a pedagogy which draws on the strengths of both the online and physical learning spaces, placing them into a dialogue with each other to create a truly flexible learning environment-and because students never know what is going to happen next – or what they might miss if they don’t attend - they pay attention throughout, the very definition of active learning.

Second, the pedagogy is operationalised by designing flexible assessment tasks that address the specific needs of both industry and students, (eg. writing up fairy tales as news stories, using universal subject matter known to students regardless of their background to produce industry-standard work). These real-world assessments are adapted from Gauntlett’s Media Studies 2.0 [6], where students are encouraged to make and produce as part of their learning experience.

Third, by emphasising team work, developing collaborative large and small group work that not only encourages students to support each another (as in mock press conferences or preparing mock news bulletins) but also develops academic and social networks that continue outside the classroom and makes tertiary learning a less challenging and isolating experience. Students start to learn from each other as much as their teachers. The goal here is to provide a performative style of delivery and supportive learning environment within which all students not only feel confident in critically engaging with media but also enjoy learning new ideas and acquiring new skills, a learner-led teaching environment that very much places each student at the centre of the learning process [24], contributing to the development of the learning community as a whole.

4 CASE STUDY 3: STUDENT COMMUNITIES IN POSTGRADUATE CREATIVE WRITING

Of course, ideas of community and space have long been interlinked. Traditionally, community is a term that marries social interaction with spatial placement [25], while more recently, there has been a shared understanding that the term ‘online community’ means a sense of belonging in a frontierless space, a coming together of like-minded people beyond material space [26, 27]. While this frontierless space may have few boundaries, it certainly has many educational uses - the explosion of online education and delivery being perhaps the best testament to this, as is the even greater volume of scholarship that has scaffolded it. However, learning space in the physical classroom is essentially kinaesthetic as it is constructed and reconstructed through the repositioning of desks to encourage discussion groups or to discourage social exchanges [28], moveable displays to direct attention, and now the need to create spatial accommodations for laptops on desks and ipads/tablets in pockets. In the online classroom, mobility is a buzzword, with the forced modifications to online delivery systems and learning environments to enable smart devices like iphones and ipads, and their small screen needs. Interestingly, mobility is also a concept that plays out in the learning spaces of creative writing PhDs, but in a way that seems to contest the expectation that the act of writing and act of community-forming should necessarily flourish online.

This becomes clearer when we consider the traditional relationship between PhD scholarship and learning spaces. Here, PhD scholarship existed outside the physical space of the classroom. Students were expected, by the time they had reached the stage of being PhD candidates, to be able to engage in higher level research autonomously without the weekly contact with teaching staff that undergraduates and honours level post graduates require. Indeed, university time allowances for PhD supervision still reflect this, with an average of one hour per month allocated into an academic supervisor’s model workload. For many students, this level of contact worked, and still works, well.

The PhD candidate in writing inhabited a similar space as the part-time student. Their main site of occupation was outside the university, in, for instance, their study at home or if less affluent, a desk in the corner of a room or perhaps even their kitchen table. These were often negotiated spaces with
shared uses. They may have had a physical space at the university, but it was most likely a desk in a
care or a laboratory space shared by others. These notions of space inevitably involve a lack of
privacy, the threat of dual use or access, and the always-likely possibility of enforced social
interaction. There is little sense of access to the dedicated pedagogic space [28, 29] nor is there a
sense of the more personal idea of ‘place’.

This is still the case with the ‘modern’ writing PhD student, yet the PhD candidate must also interact
with virtual and electronic learning spaces. They will use electronic means such as email for out of
session supervisory interactions, or may just phone supervisors with a small inquiry or request. Given
these multi-modal styles of contact, it’s not surprising that many PhD students feel comfortable with
the idea of an online, distance, or blended PhD program. Indeed, many who first enrol as face-to-face
students inevitably engage in what amounts to a blended learning model after their first year as they
become more confident about their ability to direct their own research. Depending on the discipline of
the PhD, they may also be engaged from the second year onwards in practice that requires less
supervision, such as administering surveys, conducting interviews or immersing themselves in reading
for their literature review. The learning spaces in these instances are therefore highly informal and
malleable, as are their (and their supervisor’s) relationship with that space, resulting in exposure to a
more diverse range of learning spaces, at least in the short term.

These generalities certainly hold true for our creative writing PhD candidates. As we’re presenting this
through an autoethnographic lens, our PhD program evolved out of a Masters of Arts by coursework
that was completely online. The online delivery of the MA program meant that students from all parts
of the country could enrol and participate in the electronic creative writing classroom alongside
classmates who shared cities and even suburbs. The asynchronous nature of the virtual classroom
meant that time differences and difficulties caused by geography, shift work, hours of labour and
family commitment no longer needed to be an obstacle to study [30]. The first five PhD students were
drawn from this course and hence were completely comfortable with the concept of the purely online
learning space. As Masters’ students, they had worked both independently and in groups for at least
two years without ever having met face-to-face, so it was expected that they would continue to enjoy
working this way throughout the duration of their PhD candidacy. Numbers of students in the PhD
program grew and stabilised at approximately 15 candidates, with some entering with alternative
qualifications to the online MA and with some not having participated in online education at all prior to
the PhD program.

These students often benefit from frequent contact during the first year while their enthusiasm is high.
They are needy in terms of getting feedback for their writing from their supervisors and are enjoying
the singular attention and intense workshopping that is the result of this attention. As the second year
dawns, supervisors tend to see less of them as they’re immersed in completing the first draft, and then
beginning the second draft, of their artefact, most often a novel. They appreciate the freedom from
travel, meeting times, and freedom from the sense of anxiety that meetings and weekly reviews of
their progress bring.

It is at this stage that something really interesting happens in the students’ relationship with learning
space. After being trained to be self-contained and self-directed researchers in the field of creative
writing, and after functioning successfully in this manner for a few months, students begin to request
contact with other creative writing students. There is, to return to the notion of the kinaesthetic, a
movement away from isolated scholarship and towards an initiation of community. This may take the
form of a shared electronic discussion board or a chat room. This could be interpreted as a desire to
‘belong’ and to address a desire for a ‘sense of community online’, [31] which Yasuko Kanno and
Bonnie Norton [32] consider to be an application of Anderson’s idea that communities can be
imagined [7] and projections of identity and desire can make us ‘feel a sense of community with
people not yet met’ [8].

Most interestingly, synchronous chat sessions did not garner much participation from students. This
seemed to reflect the experiences documented by researchers investigating the relationship between
engagement, participation and technology, who regularly cite technical difficulties and timed access
issues as one of the reasons synchronous chat functions are not successful [33]. Instead, once initial
contact was made with other postgraduate students in their discipline, this quickly escalated into fully-
fledged community forming which Martin Andrew and Josie Arnold suggests constitutes a dual need
for ‘an articulated and heard voice in the e-community and a desire for identification with other
imagined communities beyond the immediate e-environment’ [9]. This need to identify beyond what
now (ironically) feels to be a confined learning space (the online) resulted in the arranging of face-to-
face meetings. These commenced with dinners (arranged by an organisation for PhD students
consisting mainly of writing students) and quickly progressed to broader ranging agreements such as meeting at interstate conferences and room sharing on writing retreats. It is not merely other PhD students that they wished to connect with, but specifically other writing PhD students. Hence, the social events are arranged around the consumption of food, wine and cultural products such as films about writers, writer’s festivals and writing workshops. These are aimed at fostering a sense of inclusion for would-be writers, but exclusion for traditional PhD students.

These interactions are aimed at not only broadening the space of the creative writing PhD learning space (from the online to the physical, from the purely educational to the social), but also marked an attempt to personalise that learning space with a shared identity that set these students apart from the ‘other’ PhD students. This idea of a shared identity and the need to connect with other ‘writers’ may also be accounted for by the students’ burgeoning identification with the role of ‘writer’. One could argue that as they progress more deeply into their artefacts, they instinctively feel more writerly and differentiate themselves from the non-writerly students and so wish to identify as such [8].

Writers, and hence PhD creative writing students as scribes in training, are regarded as possessing a particular set of characteristics that sit outside the functioning and functional space of society and its everyday interactions. The act of creativity has long been held as a mythical moment and the artist who engages in this act has been traditionally positioned outside the walls of the academy, beyond the economic market, and free from the demands of transparent and replicable research. Sociologist Adrian Franklin argues that they have belonged to a ‘priestly caste in secular society’ [34] which has a social role attached that has evolved over centuries and that carries with it a set of expectations. These expectations include that the artist is at the mercy of the muse, the artist can only create under certain conditions, the artist’s voice is born rather than developed, and that the novelty of each work stands as a form of self differentiation against the mass culture that surrounds them. Furthermore, this desire to identify with the ‘priestly caste’ of the artist and to connect with other writers could be seen as projecting oneself into the space of an imagined community. Martin Andrew and Josie Arnold suggest that these students experience this ‘sense of community as an imagined space. We view individuals as idealising community and creating a sense of self through these imaginings. Students of writing want to belong to the elite group labelled ‘writers’ and to associated communities; but they also want to develop their own voices’ [8].

What is also useful to consider is the way that the candidates paired their desire for community amongst other ‘creative’ people with restaurants and cultural spaces. This can be seen as an extension of the learning space into a social space, in what Edward Soja calls ‘the process-oriented production of space’ [35]. For the writing students, the evolution of interactions from within the boundaries of the online learning space to the socially exclusionary spaces of creative outings is a necessary part of the pedagogical process. Indeed, this idea of socially excluding other students could be theorised through Soja’s notion of ‘third space’, which he argues is an open ended set of defining moments [36] in which new identities can be established and marginalised voices can be articulated [37]. By functioning as a third space, the restaurants, bars and writerly gathering places allow physical connections to be made between previously online only identities in a way that still allows for the critical engagement, craft related discussions, and scholarly interactions that had occurred in the purely virtual learning space. In this way ‘third space’ is a blend of the learning and social spaces. It is, to use Soja’s term, ‘a fully lived space’, yet the absence of ‘other’ PhD students also marks it as a space that is very much ‘a political project’ [36]. In this way it can be seen as a critical ‘thirding’ that uses exclusion as a form of cementing inclusive relationships that will feed back into the online pedagogical experience when the students re-enter the virtual learning space or PhD supervision space.

**Conclusion**

In some ways online delivery has made all learning spaces ‘third spaces’, places between work and home that mix elements of both together [38], making any bedroom, any kitchen, any coffee shop a potential learning space. But in this embrace of the frontierless space of online, some of the benefits of physical learning spaces seem to have been lost and flexibility itself is at risk of being sacrificed in favour of convenience. As these three case studies demonstrate, across disciplines and across the different stages of student life (from undergraduate to postgraduate), flexible learning spaces that offer the best of online and physical learning spaces address not only a longing in students for (as the Writing example demonstrates) physical interaction with other students (in partnerships, in teams, in social settings) but also provide the best mechanisms for active learning in a spontaneous, tactile and performative environment.
Similarly, while outside the scope of this paper, the recent PhD artefact and exegesis [39] draws attention to encountering the aesthetic through engagement in action or learning by doing. Like Gauntlett’s Media 2.0 [6] or Kamler and MacLean’s ‘embodied social practice... performed with voices and bodies’ [23], the artefact’s anthology of rhymes and songs from a variety of multi-cultural sources and accompanying exegesis highlights the way language, rhymes and songs have qualities that encourage a connection between movement and communication or ‘bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence’. As defined by Gardner, this concept relates to ‘the ability to solve problems or to fashion products using one’s whole body, or parts of the body’ [40].

Importantly, flexible learning spaces identify this as being only one of a number of intelligences. Gardner [40] and Green & Tanner [41] for example argue that online modes provide for and are inclusive of other learning styles, including:

‘Learners with a strong intrapersonal intelligence enjoy working alone and are talented at reflecting on their experiences and feelings, and learning from these reflections. For an intrapersonal learner, online education (unlike a face-to-face classroom situation) provides more time to ponder individually about online discussions, to formulate written responses and to participate in their own time’ [41].

Most importantly, online and physical learning spaces are not mutually exclusive propositions. To improve student learning and create truly learner-lead teaching environments, we would argue that the strengths of both should be incorporated into curricula to provide truly flexible learning spaces, where the kinaesthetics of active learning are valued as much as the accessibility and reach of the online environment.

Education Scotland has ‘Active Learning’ one paragraph before ‘ICT in Education’ in its Approaches to Education website - but it is mentioned first [42]. Given that language and communication is a cornerstone of the educative experience, it is reasonable to assert that one of the key challenges for online, on-campus or blended (mixed mode) delivery is to find authentic ways to engage with the kinaesthetic, ‘active’ and participatory learning environment. In Australia, it would appear that the 21st century imperative of flexible and accessible learning (from both providers and consumers) and maintenance of standards related to quality assurance is increasingly coming under both state and national scrutiny (see for example the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, [43]). The challenge then for education providers in either online, on campus and blended modes is to find authentic, active, truly flexible learning spaces that engage with multiple intelligences and professional standards as well as meaningful and transformative interaction. That is what we have started to work towards in this paper and what we intend to continue working on into the future.

REFERENCES


