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# Spaces where learning takes place: rethinking contemporary approaches to learning and teaching

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This paper discusses a variety of approaches to utilising different spaces, places and environments to make learning and teaching in higher education more effective, socially engaging, and relevant. It starts with the proposition that, in anthropological and pedagogical sense, spaces only become places through human action and imagination, the two essential human qualities critical for acquiring, applying and creating new knowledge. In addition to reflecting on different learning spaces and places, the authors discuss students' experiences with spatial (and social) contexts applied in the postgraduate unit *Contemporary Learning Environments*, an integral part of Monash University's Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice. Whilst the paradigms of experiential, reflexive and blended learning have been the underpinning pedagogical philosophies of this unit, an attempt has been made to closely align learning content with learning contexts by conducting the 'classes beyond the classrooms'—in public places such as museums, community centres and parks as well as in more traditional venues such as seminar rooms, lecture theatres and simulation labs. While providing an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data from the students' evaluation and feedback, the paper goes beyond a mere audit of the unit—arguing that learning and teaching in higher education still remains deeply embodied and meaningful social events situated in real places rather than in some dislocated, depersonalised 'non-place'.

**Keywords:** learning spaces, blended learning, experiential learning

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, the rapid growth in technological innovations has led to an increased integration of computer-mediated instructional technology into the learning experience (Graham, 2006). This has challenged traditional methods of learning and teaching, changing the way students and teachers interact (Dziuban, Moskal, & Hartman, 2005). The widespread application of educational technologies and online mediation in teaching, learning and assessment is widely known as e-learning. While e-learning was initially seen as a revolutionary change in how teachers would teach and students learn, it has also become clear that the internet alone is not sufficient in replacing all aspects of traditional face-to-face learning and teaching (Goodfellow & Lea, 2007). More recently, the e-learning paradigm has

been increasingly challenged by other approaches that combine both online and on-site/face-to-face learning. The term blended learning has consequently emerged to describe situations of combined face-to-face and computer-mediated instruction, although its exact definition remains contested.

Blended learning represents a broader, more fluid and more inclusive approach to learning and teaching rather than merely replacing face-to-face teaching with online content. This fluidity, Sharpe et al. (2006) argue, is a positive—as the lack of clarity allows instructors and course designers to develop their own meaning of the term within the context of their courses or institutions. Verkroost et al. (2008:501) see blended learning as ‘the total mix of pedagogical methods, using a combination of different learning strategies, both with and without the use of technology’. Similarly, Bliuc et al. (2007:234) define blended learning as ‘learning activities that involve a systematic combination of co-present (face-to-face) interactions and technologically mediated interactions between students, teachers and learning resources’. Garrison and Kanuka (2004:96) emphasise ‘the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online experiences’ resulting in a ‘harmonious balance’. All these different definitions suggest that the process of designing blended courses requires a great deal of planning and forethought.

Many would agree, however, that access to information does not equal education and that technologically-enhanced teaching delivery does not necessarily make education more effective or engaging. By increasing the flexibility of access by, for instance, simply video recording lectures and putting them online, we are very likely to reduce social, experiential and affective aspects of learning, unless we carefully consider how best to use technology in order to replicate and blend these learning aspects in an online (and off-line) environment.

The increasing access to online learning has resulted in predictions that face-to-face learning may be left behind as online education takes over. Utopian predictions about free spaceless education—where ‘access to college-level education will be free for everyone; the residential college campus will become largely obsolete; tens of thousands of professors will lose their jobs; the bachelor's degree will become increasingly irrelevant; and ten years from now Harvard will enrol ten million students’ (Harden 2013)—have been perceived as rather apocalyptic by many university teachers fearing for their professional futures. The staggeringly low completion rates of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) (Norvig, 2012), however, suggest that online education is not about to take over face-to-face learning anytime soon. The debate surrounding these issues can be followed on *The Conversation*, an online portal of Australian academics (cf. Nelson & Dawson, 2012; Riley, 2013).

Findings that online education is insufficient in engaging students suggests that students place an important amount of emphasis on real rather than virtual learning places. ‘Real places’ can be divided into those that hold meaning for individuals and those which are void of meaning and are merely spaces that individuals pass through—non-places. Anthropologist Augé describes non-places as places of transience that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as places (1995). Non-places, according to Augé, include supermarkets, airports, hotels, motorways, internet hubs and similar spaces with which we do not (nor are we supposed to) develop lasting and meaningful social relationships. Unlike non-places, ‘places are made up of experiences [...] composed of both culturally created and natural elements, intertwined and inseparable from human identity’ (Tuan 2001:183). Not many teachers would disagree that it is exactly this social and affective aspect of place that we aim to create and foster in classrooms and other places where learning and teaching take place.

The aim of this paper is to explore the importance of spatial, social, experiential and emotional dimensions of learning and teaching in the present times. While acknowledging the contemporary realities—both real and virtual—we argue that learning and teaching in higher education still remains deeply embodied and meaningful social events embedded in real places rather than in some dislocated, depersonalised ‘non-places’.

## **Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice**

Among others, this set of issues and challenges have been carefully considered when putting together the Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (GCAP), a postgraduate programme introduced in 2012 at Monash University, which replaced the earlier Graduate Certificate in Higher Education.

GCAP is designed for academics preparing for a career in higher education. Staff employed at Monash University's Australian and international locations, or at another tertiary institution can enrol. The course has been designed to enable students to customise their study to their career aspirations, discipline area and global context. The course consists of four six-point units and outcomes have been benchmarked against the AQF level 8 generic outcomes of graduate certifications. While all GCAP units are designed along the principles of blended learning, in this paper we have chosen to discuss only one unit, HED5062 *Contemporary Learning Environments*—its design, implementation and evaluation.

## **Design**

When naming the unit, rather than using the words spaces and places we opted for the broader term ‘environment’ (in plural), in order to encompass the totality of both physical dimensions of space and social aspects of place—or the whole ‘complex of social and cultural conditions affecting the nature of an individual or community’. The HED5062 unit guide states that this unit provides students with a structured introduction to the key contemporary learning environments in higher education, allowing participants to examine the influence of different spaces on learning. It introduces ways of promoting learning in a range of different contexts both indoor and outdoor, and on-site and online. A variety of teaching and learning approaches are employed: workshops, discussion groups, field trips, mini study tours, online tutorials, group projects, case studies and outdoor activities. Students are required to undertake five modules out of nine modules on offer:

- 1) Experiential and reflexive learning: an old philosophy for a new age;
- 2) Blended Learning and the role of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE);
- 3) Taking higher education beyond the classroom;
- 4) Games and informal learning;
- 5) Learning and teaching across cultures in higher education;
- 6) Embedding 'Education for Sustainability' in contemporary higher education practice;
- 7) Simulations in real and cyber space;
- 8) Creative learning environments for teaching; and
- 9) Engaging learning environments: Increasing engagement in large classes.

Each workshop involves theoretical and practical aspects of the respective learning environment as well as online and on-site learning activities. Self-guided learning and peer learning are an integral part of the learning strategy. In addition to workshops conducted in a free-flowing style as forum of ideas and on-site experiential learning activities, online tutorials (forum as chats) on the Moodle platform are utilised for group discussions, sharing reflections on the workshop themes and situating the specific content covered in each activity in the broader context of the unit and in relation to the assessment tasks. The assessment tasks are aimed at encouraging reflection, collaboration, development and innovation within teaching practice.

Students are encouraged to consider space, place and environment from a social-constructivist perspective and how these overlapping spatial categories, as a hidden precondition for the processes of organisation in education and elsewhere, can generate playfully possible realities and real possibilities. These include 'the development of new discourses, new forms of communication, and even the development of new learner identities' (Kornberger & Clegg, 2003:86-87). The identities of learners as active participants in knowledge production have been fostered in a range of different learning contexts. Rather than regarding the learning contexts as mere physical or virtual structures in which learning takes places, we promote the idea of learning contexts as being inseparable from content itself—as how and where we learn very much influences what and why we learn. Thus we purposely made our students aware of the contexts where learning activities were conducted, encouraging them to explore and challenge the entrenched dichotomies of different spaces such as, for instance, public vs. private, formal vs. informal, university vs. community/industry, outdoor vs. indoor and online vs. on-site or face-to-face.

Furthermore, learning was not seen only as a two way knowledge creation and transfer between the students and the lecturers; it also aimed at a broader reach that was not limited by the real, virtual or imagined walls of academia. While knowledge transfer is usually understood as a transfer from academia to community and industry, we looked for ways to demonstrate that this also worked other way around, that academia could—and should—learn from community and industry. We wanted to practically demonstrate that at universities we do not teach 'value neutral' skills, that ethics are at the core of every pedagogical approach and should underpin every discipline, expert knowledge and skill. To avoid teaching turning into 'preaching', we made this important aspect implicit rather than explicit, facilitating reflexive engagement with the 'why' and 'why would I care' aspects of learning in real

contexts that often were outside of the campus. Choosing the right context or learning environment proved to be crucial in this endeavour.

To illustrate how we implemented the unit and tackled the set of implicit learning goals—blending together not only different approaches to teaching in a range of learning environments but also ensuring that different ideas and learning outcomes got blended in way that was both accessible and assessable—we have chosen to describe one module as an exemplar. The selected module described here has a generic name *Taking higher education beyond the classroom*.

When designing and describing each of the modules in the unit guide, we left them flexible enough to be modified depending on students' interests and learning needs; thus actively engaging them in every aspect of the learning and teaching process from the beginning. The module *Taking higher education beyond the classroom* was described as aiming to explore the potential of learning environments beyond the classroom (and campus) such as field-based learning, study tours, work-integrated learning, outdoor education and learning in open-for-public spaces, institutions and in the community.

The module included two parts: theoretical and practical. The theoretical part involved a two-hour workshop where the different types of beyond the classroom learning were discussed and a decision was reached regarding which of the suggested sites to visit. Prior to the classroom workshop, students participated in online activities on the Moodle platform, which involved forum and chat discussions and accessing selected textual and visual material relating to this module.

The practical part involved a site visit and learning experience in a non-academic or beyond the classroom environment. It was agreed to consider a number of public places. Out of the four shortlisted sites—including the Immigration Museum, the Scienceworks Museum, the Jewish Holocaust Centre and the National Gallery of Victoria, all based in Melbourne—a majority of students voted for the Holocaust Centre. One of the reasons why this site attracted higher interest than some others was also the fact that the Holocaust Centre was closest to the University and easily accessible by public transport.

## **Implementation - Learning from the Holocaust**

The Jewish Holocaust Centre is an institution dedicated to the memory of the six million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. While this is a community-run organisation, its aim is also to educate the wider community about what the Holocaust really is. The Centre's website states: 'We consider the finest memorial to all victims of racist policies to be an educational program which aims to combat anti-Semitism, racism and prejudice in the community and foster understanding between people.'

Once the decision was reached to visit the Holocaust Centre, the unit coordinator booked a guided tour, which involved an afternoon where the group was to explore how places such as museums could be utilised for teaching, as well as how learning happens in such an environment. The group was asked to explore how relationships between universities and communities can be established and sustained on an equal basis partnership. Ethics in education was another important area to be explored in this learning environment. When reflecting on their roles as visitors to the Centre and students/academics at the university, we asked the students to reflect on their other social identities such as community members, their

cultural background, family roles etc. Students were asked to reflect on how much these 'other' identities influence how we learn and teach.

As a physical space, the Holocaust Centre, occupying two floors of a modest building nestled in a residential neighbourhood in Melbourne, is thoughtfully designed as a learning environment, starting with a memorial fire burning at the entrance to the location of galleries, seminar rooms and the museum, which is shaped in the form of a spiral corridor filled with artefacts. The use of space, lighting, sound and technology such as interactive digital maps all play an important role in the learning experience of this environment. Of course, social and personal dimensions—experiential, reflexive and emotional—were crucial in connecting the content and context together with what could be learned in this place.

The programme involved a short lecture on the Holocaust delivered by the Centre's director, viewing a multimedia exhibition on Rescuers, and a tour of the museum sections. Our group was welcomed by two volunteers who directed us to a seminar room filled with some fifty high school students who were also visiting on the day. The seminar room served as a formal welcome room where the director gave a short presentation on the history and purpose of the Centre, followed by a lecture about the Holocaust. The director was a skilful presenter who engaged the audience by inviting questions relating to race, racism, discrimination, persecution. The lecture turned into a lively discussion in which both the high school students and Monash students participated.

The group then separated from the high school group who went to the museum section while we were led into a gallery room to see the Rescuers, a touring exhibition from the USA, made of photographs and extraordinary stories from the Holocaust and genocides in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda and Cambodia. The exhibition highlighted acts of courage by ordinary heroes who resisted overwhelming tides of prejudice and violence to risk their lives saving others. Using photography and narratives it aimed to deepen awareness and understanding of the presence of rescue behaviour during genocides. The organisers of the exhibition hoped that visitors would leave with a better knowledge of how one person can make a difference in the face of organised violence. This part of the visit was very much along the self-guided learning principles and each student read the narratives, watched the photographs and spent time reflecting and processing the stories without asking or being asked any questions.

The tour concluded with a visit to the Holocaust museum attached to the Centre. The museum has a large number of original artefacts mostly donated by the Holocaust survivors who migrated to Australia after WWII. An interactive map of Europe showed how many Jews were exterminated in total and the percentage in each of the countries. These figures proved a staggering revelation to many students. On display was an original striped uniform worn by an inmate in one of the Nazi concentration camps. We could see the stains of someone's suffering on the two pieces of clothing in front of us. There was also a mini replica of a concentration camp made by a survivor who needed to reconstruct his memory in that way. There were IDs, letters, diplomas, photographs ... and the names of those who connected with the visitors beyond their ashes.

One of our tour guides, an energetic lady in her eighties, started telling us her own story. It was she and her husband in one of the black and white photographs we were looking at. They both looked very young and happy. Each of their black winter coats displayed the Star of David. This was her wedding photo; she was only sixteen when the photo was taken. She and her boyfriend, who was twenty at the time, decided to get married hoping that, as husband and wife, they would remain together even if they were to be transported. Shortly after the photo was taken, they were separated and sent to different concentration camps, never to be reunited

again. He perished as did all of our guide's relatives, apart from her twin sister. The fact that they were twins saved their lives. After being transported to Auschwitz, she and her sister were selected by the notorious Doctor Mengele for his experiments.

The woman told the group about the many details about life in Auschwitz and the kinds of 'scientific' experiments Dr Mengele conducted on her and other children. We could only listen, moved in every possible human way with some students unable to hide their tears. We all felt very privileged to have been in the company of someone so special and at the same time so ordinary.

We left the Holocaust Centre feeling that we had learned many important lessons as both members of academia and citizens of the world. Many of these feelings were reflected in online forums, individual discussions with the students and in the evaluation of the unit.

## Evaluation

The practice of evaluating teaching and courses in higher education is now widespread. Universities routinely evaluate courses, their teachers and units, and as the practice has grown a substantial literature has developed. Although there is some concern in the academic community about the use of such surveys, there are studies that show that course evaluation questionnaires provide reliable and valid measures of teaching effectiveness (Marsh 1987, 2007; McKeachie 1997).

Research studies have included discussions around student evaluations of teaching from a multidimensional perspective (Marsh and Dunkin, 1997) to surveys that identify features of exemplary teaching (Feldman, 1996). Confidence in these instruments has led to individual teachers and units being evaluated by instruments on a regular basis. Consequently, upon completing this unit, students completed an anonymous unit evaluation—Monash Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU). Monash SETU contains five standard survey items:

- UW1. The course enabled me to achieve its learning objectives*
- UW2. I found the course to be intellectually stimulating*
- UW3. The learning resources in this course supported my studies*
- UW4. The feedback I received in this course was helpful*
- UW5. Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this course*

These items are used to capture students' perceptions of aspects of a course/unit using a five point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). In addition, to these quantitative measures, students are required to respond to two open-ended questions:

- 1. What were the best aspects of this unit?*
- 2. What aspects of this unit are most in need of improvement?*

## Results and Discussion

Quantitative ratings and qualitative comments are used as sources of evaluative data for the unit. In addition, a series of unsolicited emails and online discussions on Moodle forums are used to reflect on the students' experiences. There were 29 students enrolled in the unit: 12 males and 17 females, of these, 18 responded to the SETU survey. The results in Table 1

indicate that the new HED5062 unit is in a strong position with all items scoring above the university and faculty medians across all indicators (Items 1-5) with a response rate above 62%.

**Table 1**  
**Unit Evaluation Results s2, 2012**

unit-code	#enrl	#resp	%resp	UW1	UW2	UW3	UW4	UW5
HED5062	29	18	62.07	4.22	4.50	4.25	4.20	4.25
Fed	10,278	3,450	33.57	4.12	4.13	4.09	3.99	4.03
Uni	163,659	49,901	30.49	4.09	4.11	4.04	3.95	4.03

The researchers took a thematic analysis approach to the qualitative student responses to the open-ended question ‘*What were the best aspects of the course?*’ and an unsolicited email. The categories used to code the student comments were arrived at by the two principal researchers independently reading through all the comments for the unit along with the unsolicited email to list common emerging themes. These themes included: 1) carefully constructed course; 2) how best to use technology to create a blended lesson; 3) exploring the class beyond the classroom; 4) benefits of social and affective aspect of place; and 5) generation of ideas for teaching improvement. These themes can be divided into two overarching areas: blended learning course design and the use of place and context in learning.

### **Blended learning course design**

Students commented positively on the design of the course which thoughtfully integrated multiple learning contexts with face-to-face—including on- and off-site, and online learning.

#### *1) Carefully constructed course*

The process of designing blended courses requires a great deal of planning and forethought. While the paradigms of experiential and reflexive learning have underpinned the pedagogical philosophies of this unit, an attempt was made to closely align learning content with learning contexts. This was achieved by the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online lessons. These carefully constructed lessons that included visits to museums, community centres and parks were much appreciated by the students. Illustrative comments include:

*The way the course has been structured particularly the integration of various components and learning activities as well as the opportunity to have different presenters, made the whole experience an interesting one. I also enjoyed the visits e.g., to the museum, it was quite interesting.*

Unit evaluation comment semester 2, 2012

*I really enjoyed the course and I'd like to thank you for all of the work you put into it. I think you've constructed a very useful course which could benefit academics throughout their careers as party of their professional development...*

Unsolicited student email 2012

## 2) *How best to use technology to create a blended lesson*

The unit aimed to increase the flexibility of access through online learning, but without reducing the social, experiential and affective aspects of learning. This careful consideration of how best to use technology in order to replicate and blend these learning aspects in an online (and off-line) environment, acted as an exemplar for students. An integral part of the workshops involved self-guided learning and peer learning. It was these opportunities where students could share their reflections on the workshop themes and involve themselves in group discussions via the online forums that they valued.

- *The unit leads me to know about Blended Learning, an approach that I currently adopt to teaching, but has not been given enough serious thought. I find there is so much to learn in teaching and there is so much support that we could resort to.*

Unit evaluation comments semester 2, 2012

## **The importance of place and context in learning**

Student comments highlighted their appreciation of integrating place and context with learning which resulted in increased engagement on the part of students.

## 3) *Exploring the class beyond the classroom*

A particular highlight for participants was the module *Taking higher education beyond the classroom* described above, which explored the potential of learning environments beyond the classroom (and campus). Illustrative comments from students indicated that these experiences were one of the best aspects of the course:

- *The field trip was a highlight*
- *Experiential learning, visiting site*
- *Interesting modules, highly engaging- ... some great work on international study tours*

Unit evaluation comments semester 2, 2012

The unit promoted learning in a range of different contexts both indoor and outdoor, and on-site and online. It exposed students to a variety of teaching and learning approaches—including workshops, discussion groups, field trips, mini study tours, online tutorials, group projects, case studies and outdoor activities, which were most appreciated by the participants:

*Thanks so much for a very creative and invigorating subject. As you said we were exposed to some rather different potential learning environments. The subject may have made some of us feel less than comfortable, but it is always important to be challenged and to think of other possibilities...*

Unsolicited student email 2012

## 4) *Benefits of social and affective aspect of place*

We argue that spaces only become places through human action and imagination, and that these are the two essential human qualities critical for acquiring, applying and creating new knowledge. Participants felt that this social and affective aspect of place provoked thinking and encouraged discussion:

- *An interesting variety of thoughtfully-constructed modules which provided opportunities to think creatively about my practice and get constructive feedback.*
- *good discussions of experiential learning - such a critical part of learning and it was well discussed/ explored*  
Unit evaluation comments semester 2, 2012

#### 5) *Generation of ideas for teaching improvement*

Students were made aware of the contexts where learning activities were conducted, and were encouraged to challenge the entrenched dichotomies of different spaces and contexts. As such, this generated new ideas for teaching improvement.

- *thank you for running an interesting unit. I have been exposed to several new ideas in teaching and I am eager to incorporate some of them in my future teaching.*
- *... that I've found the unit very relevant and useful -- I've already started using elements of experiential teaching and simulation in my classes -- and that I found the creative approaches particularly interesting and thought-provoking.*

Unit evaluation comments semester 2, 2012

Finally, one of the students wrote in her evaluation that ‘all academics in the University - not just new recruitments - should be encouraged to take this course!’

### **Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted the importance of the spatial, social, experiential and emotional dimensions of learning and teaching. Learning and teaching has recently seen the emergence of online educational technologies and new paradigms such as blended learning and e-learning providing alternatives to the traditional ways of face-to-face learning; learning no longer centres on merely sitting in a lecture, listening to professors, reading textbooks and taking tests.

Since the beginning of the digital revolution and the emergence of the virtual space, there has been an on-going debate about how and to what extent higher education sector should respond to the technological and social innovations. This debate has not only been concerned with the practical challenges of bringing the virtual world to the reality of the classroom, but has also raised some ontological questions about what education is or should be about in this new era.

While educational and mainstream technologies provide a part of the answer regarding how to contemporise learning and teaching, a highly important issue is how to create learning environments that place students in situations that mirror reality (or are reality) and enable them to approach learning from a holistic perspective. A holistic approach can be achieved by blending the best aspects of online and face-to-face learning.

In this paper, we have described how we developed our own blend of situational, face-to-face and online learning to create engaging learning environments within the HED5062. While acknowledging the contemporary realities—both real and virtual—we conclude that learning and teaching in higher education still remains deeply embodied and that meaningful social

events should be embedded in real places rather than in some dislocated, depersonalised ‘non-places’.

The positive student feedback of the learning experience embedded in a real place, the Holocaust museum, suggests that the move toward online learning needs to be moderated and carefully integrated with face-to-face and situational learning experiences. This suggests that predictions that education is moving towards becoming spaceless may not be accurate. However, the debate remains highly polarised: while there are those at one end of the spectrum who idealise the endless possibilities of digital technologies and the virtual space, proclaiming the end of universities, there are likewise those, at the other end, who romanticise the past when students actually read books and attended classes. The learning experience presented here reveals a need to moderate between these extremes. Our experiences show that students engage with learning when it involves real places; these are the spaces where learning takes place.

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