Learnings through explorations of the teaching space: Creating climates of collaboration

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LEARNING THROUGH EXPLORATIONS OF THE TEACHING SPACE: CREATING CLIMATES OF COLLABORATION

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Beanbags, adjustable tables, retractable walls, high-speed internet and numerous digital devices dominate the current concept of the modern classroom. Urged by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand to build all new classrooms as Innovative Learning Environments (Ministry of Education, 2015), more and more students are finding themselves operating in spaces of various shapes and sizes. Influenced by the PST framework by Radcliffe et al. (2008), these environments tend to focus on creating a balance between the elements of pedagogy, technology and space. While the jury is still out on the benefit of the ILE spaces, there has been universal agreement that education needed to rethink the outdated single cell design (Benade, 2016).

The concept of the ILE as a flexible multipurpose space, is not new to those of us who teach in the arts, physical education, early childhood, and many others. These hands-on disciplines require spaces suited to interactive, experiential and embodied learning experiences. Belittled historically as subjects of little value (see McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006; Dyson et al., 2017), it is tempting now to be smug about the positive rhetoric surrounding these 'new' flexible spaces. Resisting the lure of saying, I told you so, I wonder instead, how, as experienced ILE educators, we might inform teachers' thinking around these new spaces.

Transforming pedagogy is not as simple as providing a new space. As a drama educator and advocate for embodied knowledge, I typically teach in an empty room inviting my initial teacher education students not to receive but react, respond, move, share, explore and interact. I position myself alongside students to work in what, I hope, may become a process of collaborative learning. In the ultimate flexible space (see image below), in this bare room, I move around students and resist the familiar teacher centred approaches typically supported by conventional classroom layouts. By contrast, I find collaborative learning in spaces with established layout and fixed furnishings is hard. My attempts to resist didactic teaching is thwarted by consoles, desks, doors and student expectations. These students consistently attempted to sideline their agency and instead return to the comfortable, likely familiar, position of passive knowledge recipients (Albers, 2009).

Figure 1:   *Drama teaching space.*

My interest in the impact of physical spaces upon pedagogy initially arose in early 2019, while engaged in a collaborative research project to integrate mathematics and drama. This project employed drama to task students with the redesign of an existing flea circus, into a cruelty-free cockroach circus. I cleared the furniture, sat with students in a circle and physically attempted to refute my role as a figure of authority. While students remained located safely within the classroom, its layout and furniture were altered throughout the drama. In this newly augmented space, the class, enthused by the topic, the physicality of drama and an opportunity to take charge, cooperated well (see planning board below).

Figure 2:   Student work on the flea circus.

In small groups, however, they struggled to productively collaborate with one another. Perhaps we naively thought the drama task would be enough to keep them on task, although I suspect that this was only part of the problem. Without a central figure to guide, teach or motivate the group, they just did not know how to work together. While interested in the topic, they appeared to lack the skills and dispositions required for effective group work. Upon reflection, it became evident that the teacher and I needed to strengthen those competencies with students before attempting the drama.

Whether rehearsing a play or exploring ideas through theatrical conventions, drama relies upon effective group work and a group's willing cooperation (Cahill, 2002). Ideally, I spend the beginning of any drama class preparing for group work by creating a sense of community before launching into the curriculum. This realisation supports Kutnick & Blatchford's (2014) concept of social pedagogy, which recognises learning as a social practice subject to numerous variables and an integral aspect of all teaching and learning.

The significance of the social pedagogy appeared again whilst researching the move to an ILE space with fellow drama practitioner, Anne Thomson. Anne explained that while preparing to relocate to a new ILE building, it was the socially created spaces rather than the physical ones that dominated her pedagogy. She asserted the importance of beginning each new class sitting together in a circle to build trust and establish her position as "a shared part of the learning" (Thomson, 2019, p. 8). Anne sought to create a deliberate collaborative space that could exist regardless of, or despite, the physical space. While the new ILE spaces presented numerous challenges and opportunities, her praxis remained focused on maintaining the safety and trust between participants, essential to drama (Edmiston, 2012).

Keen to explore my own interest in cultivating collaborative learning spaces, I experimented in my teaching with how the physical spaces impacted upon the pedagogical. During a single semester, I purposefully taught one paper in a variety of rooms, to see if and how, the difference in physical spaces restricted or enabled my pedagogy (see below for two examples of varying teaching spaces).
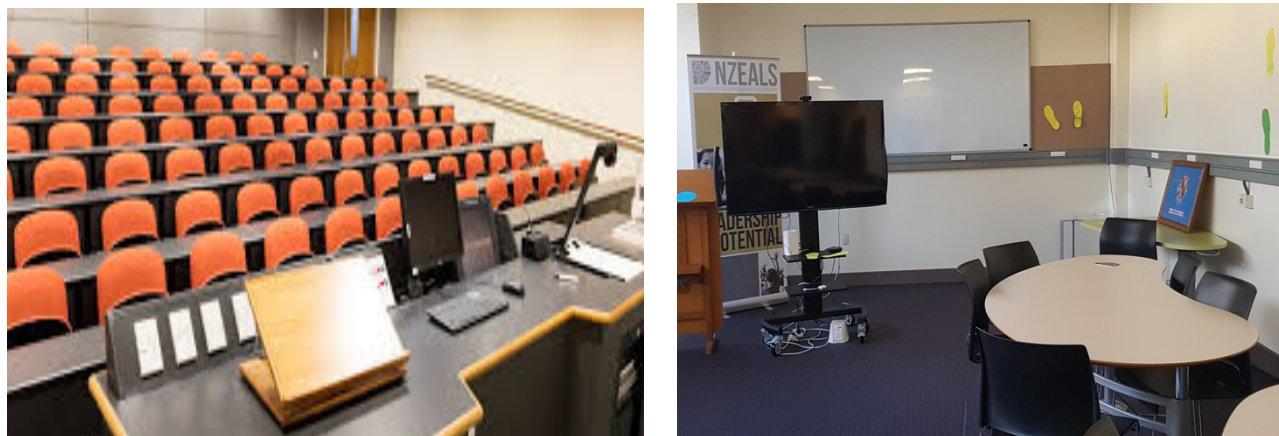
Figure 3:   Examples of teaching spaces.

Despite my best efforts to engage in collaborative teaching and learning, compromises were made. An inability to see students properly, move easily around the seating or reposition the technology, ensured that, at times, interactive tasks were scrapped in favour of more didactic approaches. Although, the students reportedly enjoyed the use of culture circles (see Freire, 1973) and interactive approaches; when the classroom or furniture presented an obstacle, they quickly reverted to the normative behaviour of the compliant student. For example, posting ideas up around the room onto poster sheets to invite ideas across the entire class became reduced to shuffling paper across a small group of desks.

At the end of 2019, I mentored Lily, a Master of Teaching and Learning student trying to improve students' use of expressive language through drama. The drama required casting her Year 5 and 6 primary school students as script writers, commissioned to write a new TV show for the network *'PicFlix'*. Yet again, we reconfigured the furniture as we moved into the drama world to establish a more collegial 'writers' room' space. The class eagerly began to collaborate within the drama. They created freeze frames, developed characters, wrote short scenes, and responded well to the teacher working as fictional character *Samantha*. Initially they placed themselves into groups and worked enthusiastically; however, without continual teacher involvement, this early collaboration foundered. Students either squabbled, deferred to the dominant child or waffled about, which ultimately limited their progress. Although the space, task and technology offered opportunities for innovation and collaboration, they still did not occur. Despite having experienced several project-based learning activities throughout the year, these students struggled to cooperate, perhaps suggesting that although innovative teaching approaches require collaborative skills, they don't necessarily teach them.

In considering these varying experiences in relation to innovative spaces and pedagogies, I posit that while ILEs can undoubtedly influence teaching and learning experiences, they are only part of the puzzle. Most research on innovative learning environments focuses upon the impact and effect of the physical environment on student agency and innovative pedagogies (see for example Wall, 2016). However, as Osbourne (2018) identifies, students require a sense of belonging to seize this agency. As physical spaces become increasingly multipurpose and digital, this sense of belonging becomes increasingly intangible. Classroom spaces designed for many don't belong to anyone and can no longer offer the comforting space of a "home" room. This is potentially exacerbated by the constant division of students according to various teaching activities and further destabilising the students' sense of place.

A climate of collaboration relies instead upon the ongoing relations of learning, embedding community and connection throughout the learning to ensure students question, explore and discover. Without cultivating a social climate of inclusion, participants will likely shun the risk taking, creativity and criticality sought by advocates of the ILE. A social context that develops positive, inclusive and productive relationships and invites dissent is crucial for empowering students to create their own knowledge (Kutnik & Blatchford, 2014).

As a practitioner accustomed to making do with whatever space is available, the opportunity for purposeful spaces for collaborative learning and teaching is appealing. Teachers and students are navigating these new spaces together and this spirit of collaboration should inform and permeate the

learning. I would encourage all teachers to interrogate new or existing spaces, pedagogies and technologies. To optimise ILE spaces, we need to ask what actions we can take to enhance the social spaces for learning within them. Happily, educators as social agents can cultivate the climate of collaboration that arguably lies at the centre of all quality learning.

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