



LaTrobe University Learning Commons

*“Redesigned and purpose built spaces provide the capacity to extend and enhance pedagogical repertoires”*

acknowledged that this ecology of space takes place in a context of high quality teaching [and teachers] and learning, assessment and the tracking of students’ progress, setting targets, and the support and early intervention of students.

I will argue along with Blackmore, *et al.* (2010, p.48) that “redesigned and purpose built spaces provide the capacity to extend and enhance pedagogical repertoires” and therefore enhance student engagement and performance. Thus, within this context, it is incumbent that our leadership teams collaboratively develop school cultures which are risk taking, where experimentation is encouraged and critical conversations on how space and pedagogy speak to each other are developed.

**De-privatising the classrooms: learning walks and classroom visits**

An essential first step would be to de-privatise our classrooms. This is no longer a desirable but rather a moral imperative for the profession. If we do not want to further risk disengaging our students, we need to foster visible learning and celebrate rather than hide our teaching and learning from our students and colleagues behind walls and opaque doors. Michael Fullan (2008) reminds us that “Access to seeing effective practices is necessary for success. It takes up the dilemmas of ‘de-privatising practice’ in which it becomes normal and desirable for teachers to observe and be observed in teaching facilitated by coaches and mentors.”

A practical example is found in the Ofsted’s report into 12 outstanding secondary schools in the United Kingdom (2009, p.19) where members of the senior leadership team do classroom visits every day to support the staff and give clear expectations of what is required in teaching and learning. In addition: “Teachers are expected to make good practice visits to other schools and disseminate their findings on their return. They undertake peer observations across the departments so that good practice is widely shared and inter-disciplinary collaboration is fostered.”

Another example is the strategy of ‘Learning Walks’ conducted at Wood Elementary in the Carmel Clay School District in Indiana, United States. Teachers go into colleagues’ rooms and observe them teaching. The criteria developed by the teachers on their ‘walks’ provide a basis for fruitful discussion and this is where the real learning takes place. As Julie Steiny (2009) explains: “Walkers see the same classrooms together, but don’t always have the same impressions, so the discussion is rich with the details each person shares. In the end, the team jointly composes a letter to the whole school that describes what they saw, always beginning

# The Third Teacher: from classrooms to learning ecologies

**John Muscovitz** on the effect of learning environments

*“Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.”*

**Introduction**

The opening voice over from Gene Roddenberry’s 1960 science fiction classic Star Trek set in the 23rd Century is a nice juxtaposition with the Reggio Emilia’s organisation of the physical environment in education, often referred to as the child’s “third teacher”. The Reggio approach places a great deal of importance in the belief that children can best create meaning and make sense of their world through environments which support complex, varied, sustained, and changing relationships between people, and the world of experience, ideas and the many ways of expressing ideas.

Stephen Harris, at the 2011 K-12 Technology in Education Congress, captured my imagination when he spoke about this “Third Teacher” as carefully designed, diverse spaces filled with ‘campfires’, ‘watering holes’, ‘caves’ and ‘mountaintops’. Since then it has been a valuable prism from which to engage in teaching and learning.

This paper is advocating that we need to view these ‘campfires’ and ‘watering holes’ through learning ecologies of space that are open, dynamic, interdependent, diverse and adaptive across the home, school, and community. While this is not the scope of the paper, it is



*St Macartan's Primary School Outdoor Learnscapes*

with positive impressions. They discuss problems only in terms of the school's big-picture progress, never naming names. The teams often make recommendations."

### **Deinstitutionalising education**

Along with de-privatising our classrooms we need to deinstitutionalise our schools. Sadly our schools have not kept pace with how society has changed. Lee Crockett (2012) frames the challenge. "We need to prepare our students for their future not our past."

Interestingly, some blogs like Pena-Lopez (2012) are calling for a movement to detach learning from institutions. He argues that "If there is an abundance of content and knowledgeable people, how do universities, schools, libraries, etc. still make sense?"

While I do not advocate throwing the baby out with the bath water, now is the time to challenge old factory model assumptions such as the ones noted by Chism (2006) that: "Learning only happens in classrooms at fixed times [and that] learning is a fixed activity and demands privacy and removal of distraction, [where the] classroom always has a front, and what happens in classrooms is pretty much the same from class to class and day to day."

We really do need "to try out new ideas now [and] look at ways of designing inspiring buildings that can adapt to educational and technological change."

A good example of how to do this is the Learning Café at Glasgow Caledonian University where "the deliberate mix of refreshments, social activities and IT makes this a relaxing and friendly place where conversation and social interaction are seen as an essential part of learning." Could this model not be adopted in our senior school settings? Paraphrasing the sentiments of Prof Stephen Heppell at the 2012 ASCP Conference, "Where they eat they work, hence the need to redesign eating spaces."

You only have to look at Deakin, Griffith and James Cook Universities, as well as the Universities of Queensland and Victoria, to gain an

*Walkers see the same classrooms together, but don't always have the same impressions, so the discussion is rich with the details each person shares*

understanding of what kind of spaces will await our 21st Century learners once they leave school. [Learning Spaces in Higher Education Positive Outcomes by Design (2008) Radcliffe, *et al.* (Eds). [http://www.wilsonarchitects.com.au/sites/default/files/UQ%20Next%20Generation%20Book\\_1.pdf](http://www.wilsonarchitects.com.au/sites/default/files/UQ%20Next%20Generation%20Book_1.pdf)]

### **Meeting places of architecture and education: challenging assumptions and developing a new narrative**

To help deinstitutionalise our schools we need architecture and education, design and practice to speak to each other.

It is time, as Anne Knock (2008) says, to: "look up, look around and decide if this 'shape' fits us and fulfils our purpose." Too often teachers in their busyness do not look up to see if 'the shape fits' or challenge the assumptions around space and learning. I argue it is about time we do, in the best interest of our students.

As a starting point, I would advocate educators become a member of the Council of Educational Facility Planners Australasia (CEFPI) to foster rich conversations through school visits, networking with professionals such as architects, project managers, school principals, product suppliers and manufacturers. As CEFPI promotes, we can together in the "planning, designing, building, equipping and maintaining learning environments that centre a community and *enhance student achievement.*" (my emphasis).

I do agree with architect John Mitchell (2008 p.245) who argues that "our mental model for schools is largely based on industrial age assumptions rooted in Newtonian mechanistic world view." Mitchell argues for another paradigm of "a 'living system' view [paralleling living



St Monica's Middle School, Moonee Ponds

### *Without a contemporary vision of pedagogy the true nature of the child's third teacher, the environment will not emerge*

systems in nature] [which] asserts that the fundamental nature of reality is *relationships*, not things." His view reinforces the need for schools to shift their thinking from seeing teaching taking place in classrooms to that of learning being centred in rich ecologies of pedagogy and space.

The foundation of this rich ecology is found in the design principles advocated by Peacock (2011) who calls for space that is:

- Future proofed for future re-allocation and reconfiguration
- Bold which looks beyond 'tried and tested' technologies and pedagogies
- Experimental and creative to energise and inspire learners
- Personalised and inclusive, to support all types of learners with multiple uses and inherent flexibility
- With teacher and student control.

Perhaps if we adopted these principles we would no longer speak of classrooms. Perhaps in this new ecology students would now work in learning studios, learning plazas, and home bases. Perhaps students would shift as needed into collaborative zones such as project-planning rooms and other breakout areas.

I argue the time has come for our schools to translate metaphor into practice. Pearlman (2010 p.126) argues that "The school [can be seen] as a microcosm of the city with classrooms as houses, corridors and communal space as streets, and [the] assembly hall as town hall or forum of public life." I advocate this not

because it is different, but because it will support pedagogy for our 21st Century learners. The language we use around our spaces often lays down markers for our practice.

Further evidence that jurisdictions are taking up this challenge is found in the South Australia Department of Education and Child Development (2012 p.6–8) case study of the Australian Science and Mathematics School [ASMS] for the OECD. The study argues that there has been a significant shift from a controlled, teacher directed pedagogy, to being progressively replaced by an experience-centred and team directed model of learning. The ASMS see this as a move from *Controlling Schools* to *Discerning Schools*. Their aim was to use space and place as a learning tool through flexibility in a range of learning settings for variously-sized groups and configurations, with open plan teacher preparation work areas. Traditional classrooms are replaced by 11 learning commons which accommodate up to 50 students.

While effective change takes time, the shift is happening as the study highlights: "while initially [the] teacher needed to take a leading role in establishing the classroom as a learning community, there was evidence to suggest that with time, and with more acceptance of the changes in roles and responsibilities, teachers and students would be able to co-construct their learning community. In this way, teachers and students would be able to sustain each other as well as the level of reform."

Internationally, in European circles known as

the European 2020 strategy, creative classrooms are conceptualised as innovative learning environments and seen as Bocconi, *et al.* (2012) describe as "complex 'eco-systems' consisting of *eight* encompassing and interconnected dimensions which capture the essential nature of these learning ecosystems." Note the familiar concepts of learning ecosystems, creative classrooms, interconnected and innovative learning environments.

### **The psychology of space**

Environmental and social psychology has for many years informed us that the environment "is essential for human psychological existence and well-being (Manzo, 2003)." Papatheodorou (2002 p.448) argues that "place equals space plus meaning" and "the value of a place comes from the interaction between the inhabitants and the physical qualities of that place." While relationship is primarily seen as between teacher and students, it needs to have a broader focus to include this new learning ecology of space. Significantly, Papatheodorou goes on to argue that "without a philosophical basis that gives meaning to the educational experience to be in a lived space, the identity of the space will not emerge". I agree! In the same way without a contemporary vision of pedagogy the true nature of the child's third teacher, the environment will not emerge.

It is interesting to note how many hours students spend in their learning spaces. Arguably, it is more than what they spend in their rooms when they are not sleeping. If this is the case then is it not incumbent on educators to invest more time into exploring the correlation



Belmont Primary School

between the psychology of space and learning? Earthman (2014 p.18) asserts “there is sufficient research to state without equivocation that the building in which students spend a good deal of their time learning does in fact influence how they learn.”

Bjorkild (2010) develops this further when he relates space to behaviour saying “there is no doubt that the aesthetic quality of our surroundings is significant for both our psychological and physical welfare and therefore for learning environments.” His study should not be underestimated, which I believe has significant implications for how students learn, particularly as Bickford and Wright (2009) describe, the role “a community paradigm [can] play in facilitating learning and improving students’ engagement.”

There is more work to be done in this area, particularly in planning and thinking about how we can, as Blackmore (2010) describes, to get students to put a positive “stamp’ on the [their] space, [which] is referred in the design literature as *personalisation* (Lee 2007) or *ownership* (Killen *et al.* 2003).” I argue flexible space invites an equalitarian approach between student and teacher, or learner and learner, and can empower students through choice and teachers through risk taking. If only teachers could let go a little of their control so students could design and call the space their own!

### Technology and space

Technology also finds its place in this new learning ecology of space. In some ways it is the glue that binds pedagogy and space together.

Much has been written on the importance

of integrating technology into the spaces where students learn. Brown (2005 p.12.7) says “the convergence of the learning paradigm, IT and the Net Gen is occurring now at colleges and universities. Current and future planning must encompass this convergence by thinking of learning spaces (classrooms, informal, virtual) as a single, integrated environment”. I argue the same could be true in our schools. An implication for teachers when using technology is that they need to ensure there is not a disconnect between their teaching and the students learning, what Prensky calls, the ‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants.’

So what could the interface between technology, space and learning look like? Dr Kenn Fisher offers useful insights (2007 p.16) in the Next- or Net- Generation Learning Spaces? where he suggests we need: “small group work spaces with shared screens and IT highly integrated into all aspects of learning spaces with access to tutors, consultants and faculty in learning spaces with table space for a variety of tools and workgroup facilitation and access to experts” to support the Net Gen Trait.”

### Flexible learning: flexible spaces – do they make a difference?

I often hear from colleagues ‘*Yes this is all well and good, but does all this talk about space actually make a difference to student engagement and performance? Is it a fad? Will students get lost, especially those with learning needs? Will they be easily distracted and be off task? Why isn’t everyone doing it, if it works?*’

Great Questions! A good starting point for this discussion is the Victorian’s Department of Education and Early Childhood *Guide for*

*Principals and Teachers* (2011 p.5). It asks the question what type of learning do you value and want to encourage? It goes on to answer with a series of questions of what spaces and resources you will need to do the following:

- Social and collaborative learning?
- Integrated curriculum?
- Student directed/ teacher directed learning?
- Independent learning?
- Project work?
- Direct Instruction?

But to the question, “*does all this talk about space actually make a difference to student engagement and performance?*” Empirical research from Brook (2012) suggests “the reasonable conclusion is that active learning techniques used in spaces similar to the Minnesota’s ALCs (a series of round tables) are superior to lecture based instruction in traditional classrooms.”

While more work needs to be done the preliminary research is encouraging. Insights from the University of Drayton from Hunley and Schaller (2009) also suggest that “academic engagement was encouraged by learning spaces that were comfortable, open, flexible, and appealing.” Unlike the traditional classrooms the research found that “students described classes in one of the innovative spaces as requiring more accountability on their part because there were few physical barriers between themselves and the faculty.”

Other studies like Walker, *et al.*s. (2011) empirical study suggest that “students gave significantly higher marks to their classrooms in terms of engagement, flexibility, and fit than students in the traditional room.” Tanner (2008

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p.394) also said that “space allowing freedom of movement and circulation correlated with better test scores.”

And while it is acknowledged that not all research conclusively supports the link between enhanced performance and flexible spaces, and for others the jury is still out, there is enough research to suggest that if an effective learning ecology of space is adopted, better student engagement and performance will follow.

I like Lee Crockett's (2011 p.94) reference to the Bertelsmann study “which clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of cultivating higher level of thinking as well as a measurable learning and retention.” In the study, two groups of students were taught the same information by two different methods, one was the traditional style of lecture and the other through problem based approaches. At the end of the year, both groups were tested and guess what; the scores were identical.

What I found interesting was that one year later, the two groups, not warned, were tested again and the group that was taught with traditional methods could only recall 15 per cent of the content as compared to 70 per cent of the content for the group that was taught using the problem based learning approaches. Fascinating!

I argue that flexible spaces would far better support problem-based approaches through flexible learning than the traditional ‘industrial

age’ rows of furniture and primarily didactic instruction.

This study tells me that the remnants of the factory model echoed in some teachers’ practices of having students always in rows are dead! Prof Stephen Heppell punctuates this point when he recently said “We can mend the world with learning. But we won’t do it with a factory model of learning”

As educators, if we are to be authentic to the present, and if we want to prepare students for the Conceptual Age, as the social futurist Daniel Pink describes it, we need our spaces to support and nurture 21st Century fluencies such as empathy, innovation and creative thinking, design over utility and function, symphony over silos, risk taking and global citizenship over rote learning and rows.

And if we do not change, schools run the risk of Jack Welch's [retired CEO of General Electric] words becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. “I am convinced that if the rate of change inside an organisation is less than the rate of change outside, the end is in sight.” It is highly likely the same principle can be applied to education. Failure to seize the day with innovation and creative thinking, and design over utility and function will result in education not only becoming even more irrelevant for some of our students but also for these students becoming

less employable in a global market. In part two of this article in the next issue of *Education Today* I will explore how Mount St Benedict College has taken small steps and attempted to put this ecology of space into practice.

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