

Book Review

Middleton, A. (2018) *Reimagining Spaces for Learning in Higher Education*

Alke Gröppel-Wegener

Associate Professor, Staffordshire University

Corresponding author: a.c.groppel-wegener@staffs.ac.uk

'Where do you learn best?' is the question that Middleton asks in the preface, and promptly follows with an exploration and discussion of spaces and places for different types of learning in the context of the emerging digital-social age. From the get-go he considers the learning, rather than the teaching, and thus usefully refocuses this issue from an institutional to a learner-centred one. Case studies featuring both teacher and student perspectives are utilised to introduce authentic learning (and teaching) situations and their uses of space.

The book's first half 'New spaces in the learning landscape' lays the groundwork with an initial introduction to terms, some theory and the structure of the book. It explains the notion of a learner-centred pedagogy, particularly in the digital-social age, as opposed to the traditional classrooms (and connected teaching) hailing from the industrial age. Middleton argues:

"In the ecological and experiential view of learning, the classroom and how it is used is situated amongst the personal realities of its students. These personal contexts affect how teaching is received and good teaching will accommodate this. Active learning, as a philosophy for scheduled teaching, will develop the learner and promote lifewide and lifelong learning habits." (p. 31)

The book questions the formal-informal binary and encourages the reader to also pay attention to the non-formal space, proposing a taxonomy of formal and non-formal learning spaces to make it easier to identify and evaluate such spaces. Middleton goes further and explores in-between spaces, the spaces, places and boundaries between the spaces considered dominant, that have their uses and possibly are becoming more and more crucial in the learning space spectrum as important connectors. Really this is considering the way individuals experience spaces as part of their learning journey, rather than only paying attention to whether spaces planned for learning are doing what they are supposed to.

This book also considers open spaces – specifically reflecting experiential learning opportunities that go beyond the university walls and create authentic situations through using larger learning contexts (for example through MOOCs).

The last chapter in the first part discusses the importance of academic innovation in order to not just adopt new spaces for new learning, but also to develop them. (To me this felt a bit

out of place, and might have worked better at the end of the book, rather than closing the first part.)

The second part, 'New ways of being' conceptualises future hybrid learning spaces. Here the first chapter focuses on 'Being open and flexible' and considers self-determined and self-organised study, making links to the coffee house tradition of intellectual discussion and learning starting in the seventeenth century, before bringing it up to date by considering learning in the social-digital age. Middleton states that:

"Self-determination, learner-generated experiences, personal learning networks, authentic contexts, and spontaneous or sustained networked learning, characterise effective user-defined learning spaces. Peer-led co-operative learning in online and offline spaces and places are long established modes of learning." (p. 109)

Before continuing:

"Yet on university campuses characteristics and cultures that promote such modes of learning are largely absent from the design of the physical learning space. In the social media space, however, student-led learning is showing encouraging signs of growth." (p. 109)

The learning outside of higher education, and the spaces and places this happens in, is carefully considered by discussing social media and its potential to allow learners to build a network that is authentic and augments non-digital learning spaces, while also disrupting traditional learning spaces and practices. Similarly, the idea of learning with the help of devices (possibly the learners' own, possibly provided for them) within the formal education context is explored. Middleton argues that:

"The discourse around mobile learning is ready to move from one of technology-centred opportunity to one of pervasive personalised and situated learning place." (p. 15)

Consequently the mobile (device) context should be seen as a learner-centred context and he shows that mobile learning can provide an expanded space through technology, as part of a field trip, for example. These developments are also considered from the perspective of the digital literacies discourse – and what we can learn from that for the development of future learning spaces (or just recognising the learning spaces that already exist, even though some of them might be unplanned or located outside of the university).

This book also considers the opportunities that 'smart' and 'rich' digital media provides as opposed to traditional media, that tended to rely heavily on the written word. It is now easily possible to not just add static images, but moving ones, as well as sounds, enhancing the content learners can create. This opens up ways to engage with information as:

"rich, multidimensional digital media can be used to engage academics and their students to interact more deeply and with greater authenticity." (p. 158)

With the ability to build their own personalised networks, learners can develop their own nomadic practices to navigate and negotiate their own, individually constructed learning

space hybrids. This is a big difference to provided learning space, such as Virtual Learning Environments, which “is abstract, counter-intuitive and lacks meaning.” (p. 152)

Middleton concludes with a holistic and hybrid learning paradigm that “creates socially, digitally and physically interconnected learning spaces” (p. 31) by considering space as personal, generative, dynamic, connective, rich and hybrid.

Initially, the focus is very much on technologies, but it is not only about this. Having said that, I would have liked to see more exploration of non-traditional physical spaces – the basics here are covered in chapter 13 with an informative, if brief, section on studios and labs - but the real-life implications of using them within teaching institutions, such as Health and Safety as well as Risk Assessment contexts for taking students off campus, for example, remain under-explored, which feels like a big chunk missing when talking about spaces for learning in higher education.

The book does, however, carefully establish a context of a very complex and layered issue, which will be useful for both teachers and managers starting to think about new rooms, both in architectural planning terms and in terms of how to kit them out (new and existing). It might also give pause for thought on how to use rooms better that a facilitator of learning might be stuck in due to timetabling realities.

The case studies are well chosen and show some excellent practice, and this is a useful contribution to the book. (I would have liked page numbers linking to the case studies. While they are numbered and there is a list of them at the beginning of the book that includes the page numbers, this felt a bit cumbersome.)

Each chapter ends with a box containing questions for further thought or discussion. This is excellent practice and not only triggers individual reflection on the raised issues, but also makes each chapter a potential topic for a journal club or discussion group. (Unfortunately the hashtag mentioned in the last box following a call for feedback has since been appropriated in a different context – on Twitter at last).

Overall this is a good book for people interested in how space can be used and conceived of within learning. It would be useful as an overview for people new to this subject, and its organisation would make it easy for ‘dippers’ to just pick out the chapters they are particularly interested in. As the case studies are also visually set apart, it would be easy to read them individually and then go into more depth regarding the context that is particularly interesting.