Learning Spaces: To Maximise Student Learning

Olena ZHADKO

Center for Teaching and Learning, New York Institute of Technology,
New York, NY 10038, USA

Corresponding Author’s Email: ozhadko@nyit.edu

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In order to maximise student learning, a faculty member needs to be familiar with student learning environments and the various types of learning spaces. This session will explore three types of learning spaces: physical, virtual and social. Throughout the session, we will expand our current knowledge and skills in supporting student learning by taking advantage of and being creative with the learning spaces. This topic brings faculty together from all campuses globally as we explore it from all the cultural and societal frames of reference.

“Space—whether physical, virtual and social (intellectual and emotional)—can have [an] impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration, and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnect...” (Oblinger, 2006). Learning environments are primarily created by faculty, sometimes with the support of librarians, administrators, and technology staff. Today’s students have expectations, attitudes and constraints that differ from those of students in the past. Learning spaces often reflect the needs of the people and the learning approach of the times, thus spaces designed even ten years ago, as well as instructional methodologies used in the past, are not likely to fit perfectly with today’s students.

As we explore the various learning spaces we will consider how faculty members can make the most of the space they have.

Physical Space

Physical Space is often defined by the lighting, the furniture, and the technology in the classroom. It can be somewhat flexible and faculty can arrange or control certain aspects of it by maximising its use to benefit student learning. We often discuss an ideal space for learning, when in reality we might not necessarily have it all. There are several aspects of a physical space we can potentially utilise to support student learning that are harmonious with the learning theory: flexibility, comfort, sensory stimulation, technology support, and decentredness.

Virtual Space

Virtual Space, whether technologically enhanced, blended or fully online is defined by the technologies utilised. Various technologies can support virtual learning space. Learning can take place in distance learning rooms or via online video/audio conferencing or with the support of other technologies like a Content Management System (CMS) or a Learning Management System (LMS) that can enable online interactions and could be internally integrated in the learning process.

Student’s comfort in and proficiency with emerging technologies vary dramatically. To many faculty and administrators, students appear to have no fear of technology. Browsing, downloading and messaging can happen anywhere and anytime for them. That said, students do not always transfer their non-academic technology practices into the classroom. They might be active consumers of technology outside of the classroom but sometimes within the classroom they expect a faculty member to teach them without much effort on their part. This is when faculty members can play a vital role in helping students incorporate their technology skills into the classroom, and transform their understanding of learning into an active and self-driven activity.

Social Space

Social learning space (intellectual and emotional) is defined by the intellectual drive and the emotional state created by the faculty member in the classroom. “As research on the social aspects of learning has revealed, active engagement with the learning object—whether a lecture, laboratory process, text, or creative medium—increases the likelihood that the learner will both retain and be able to use information and skills later” (Zull, 2002). Social interactions play a vital role in facilitating learning and improving student engagement: through community, students learn (Bickford & Wright, 2006). The intellectual and the emotional aspect of the experience can foster or hinder learning. Faculty members can create spaces to facilitate active, social, and experiential learning in their classroom.

Conclusion

Faculty need to learn about the three learning spaces (physical, virtual and social) that can support student learning. In order to effectively support student learning, faculty members need to develop strategies on how to make the most of the learning spaces. This area is often overlooked and needs attention from academics who define and shape student learning journeys. This wholistic approach to student learning will help academics to touch on the various aspects of student learning experiences and will enable them to maximise their teaching efforts.
References


