

* Spatial Fluency Stories

The following stories form a collection to support student and staff appreciation of spatial fluency for developing learning, teaching and employability.

They reflect the experiences of students and staff at Anglia Ruskin University. While they have been organised to reflect the primary roles of respondents, the stories cross boundaries like the experiences they convey. Notably, many stories reflect working lives and futures in a post-pandemic and postdigital world and have value for developing employability.

This compendium of Spatial Fluency Stories comes from interviews conducted in 2024. The stories have been anonymised.

Each vignette includes a reflection paragraph and a question or provocation to help you think about the implications of the story for your own practice and experience.

Spatial fluency is,

an individual's ability to successfully navigate and negotiate the spaces they encounter, whether studying, working, or engaging with life more fully.

It addresses the postdigital world where digital technologies and media seamlessly connect across and are integrated into everything we do in study, work, and life more generally.

Spatial fluency is about navigating and negotiating the spaces, or situations, in which you are involved. Having spatially fluency becomes an unconscious competence for confidently make informed decisions.

Stories are categorised as,

1. Student experiences
2. Teaching experiences
3. Working futures

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STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Always on - the digital comfort blanket

Final year student OH travels into university by car. She lives a half hour's drive away in a rural village. She says she's not tech savvy but depends upon technologies throughout her day.

“I just thought I'd use my phone to like navigate [to] get into uni with the maps ...Well, if I didn't have that, I probably would know the route, but because I rely on that I use it every time. I think I just find it a comfort because it helps with navigating the traffic as well.”

Reflections

Not so long ago a student's personal phone was regarded as a private personal device. Phones, now understood as personal portable smart devices, were not ubiquitous. Phones were likely to have been switched off when not in use. Charges per text meant that it would be presumptuous to expect a student to use their personal phone for academic purposes.

That changed with the development of smart phones and competitive contracts. Now phones are ubiquitous and their proliferation and smart functionality ensures they are pervasive. Nowadays it would be regarded as odd if a student could not access their academic life alongside their work, leisure and home lives.

Like OH, many of us turn to our devices to check our bearings, to reassure ourselves that we are within reach of friends, and that we never feel lost. Our personal devices may be regarded as our digital comfort blankets.

Questions

1. Are personal smartphones ubiquitous and, if so, how should educators take advantage of their presence?
2. To what extent have fixed PCs and laptops been superseded by smartphones in the lives of our students, and what are the implications of this for the design and delivery of digital platforms and content?
3. If the personal device is the constant thread connecting a student's lifewide interests and responsibilities, how should universities do more to accommodate their use?

A non-formal place to be me

Non-formal learning spaces are those places where people have a reason to be outside of formal structures such as timetables and classrooms.

Final year Nursing student OH likes having the choice of where she can take her digital technology to have “a bit of variety.”

“I just like having digital tools that I can take elsewhere ...When I'm just writing essays or doing my theory, I like to be able to go to uni or go to a cafe or just like, mix it up a bit.”

She likes to come to campus, even when she has no classes to be around people. On the day in focus for the research, she lists the people who she spoke to.

“I spoke to someone at the desk I think when I got to [the campus building]. And then I spoke to the woman where I picked up the materials [in the] Schools and Colleges Team. And then I spoke to the woman at Thrive Cafe. I spoke to my friend on Messages about meeting up and then spoke to someone in Asda.”

Her university experience, outside of formal classes, is relatively bereft of social interaction. She says,

“Because we don't get the social connection, I'm looking forward to just starting working, because then I'll, you know, you get the social connections.”

Although OH says she is not tech savvy, she recognises how her phone and her laptop give her the flexibility she needs to be on campus and amongst other people.

Reflections

Non-formal in-between spaces on campus that have good Wi-Fi connectivity and that allow people to loiter purposefully create enough reason for students to come to campus.

Questions

1. Why is meeting with other people face-to-face important when we have constant and immediate access to our social networks on our digital devices?
2. What steps can a person take to optimise their in-person social connectivity?
3. What sort of places do we prefer to meet with peers when we are between formal events like lectures and meetings? What do we like about such places?

Deciding what to do and how to do it - navigating study, work, and life

Digital tools provide greater access to synchronous and asynchronous situations and media. For busy students with diverse life commitments, digital tools can make it easier for a person to organise what they do by choosing effective methods.

OG is studying Education. As part of her course, she is developing a resource base to support reading plans for school children. To do this, she needs to liaise with schoolteachers. She says she must factor in her project work carefully on top of her other commitments.

“I have to figure in when I have my time like to do [my coursework project] and then I have a couple of other things that I'm overlaying. I'm also taking a course on ancient Christianity on the side.”

Making plans is important, but it is also necessary to be adaptable.

“Well, we kind of have like a pre-planned structure of how our project is going ...in certain weeks and stuff like that for the sending of emails ...So I'm expecting to send emails out and then I expect responses.”

OG realises that being dependent on getting timely responses from the schools she is working with introduces risk to her project timeline.

“Teachers are quite busy, so they take their time getting back. “

OG says that other aspects of the project are less risky. The resources she needs are online.

Reflections

OG has to create a plan that embraces her project commitments along with her other study, work, and life responsibilities. It can be useful to use some task and project management strategies at times of pressure. Some of OG's responsibilities involve being dependent on other people - people have their own responsibilities and different motivations. Things can fall apart easily when external factors take us by surprise. Good communications with other people about your goals and expectations is essential.

Digital technologies seem to promise efficiency and reliability, but they can fail just when we need them most. Study, project work, and life responsibilities usually take more time than we anticipate. Spatial fluency involves being realistic about what can be achieved, allowing for more time, developing contingency plans, and deciding when technology can help. Using to-do lists, task estimation, and dependency and contingency planning techniques can help to anticipate the unexpected.

Questions

1. How possible is it to prioritise one aspect of your life over others? Is it possible to identify what is critical on your to-do list, and what is just 'nice-to-have'? Is it possible to redesign and optimise your tasks?
2. Can you reschedule your commitments or renegotiate their goals?
3. Can you identify straightforward tasks so you can clear the way for more challenging tasks?
4. Can you decide when technology is helping you, and when it is hindering you?

Nesting rituals

“There are people that say that they can work as long as they've got a chair and a desk, and they don't even care if it has a window.”

In contrast, CJ discusses her need to carve out time and space so that she can focus on her PhD. On campus she notes some specific spaces that are conducive to being productive in the Doctoral School and the Library.

At home she likes to connects her phone and her laptop to the big TV screen that her husband and daughter use for gaming and watching streaming TV services.

“I will have all my notes or some copy or research that I've got to edit. And then on my laptop I will do the typing and then I can use my mouse to cut and paste what's on the big screen and pull it into the other document on my laptop.

I need to have ...little rituals. I've got a scented candle. I've got a little fan in there in case I need it, and I've got some joss sticks. And I've got a big fluffy light fitting. It's huge with kind of like feathers all in it. So I tried to make that space as soft as possible in order to help me focus and work better to get that sense of deep work.”

Reflections

Studying is challenging when you haven't established rituals that work for you. Whether it is using scented candles like CJ, tidying your desk at the end of the day so it is ready for your next session, or finding a favourite place in the library, it is good to establish a tried and tested routine that you know will work for you. Sometimes this might require some negotiation with people who share your space, or require you to get to know their habits too.

Questions

1. Where did you last feel focused and productive? Why did this work for you? Were you well-rested? Were you close to refreshments? Did you like the background noise, or the silence? Were you studying alongside a friend? Get to know what works for you and start to make sure you are replicating those conditions.

Opportunities to talk

WS is an international student studying on ARU's Peterborough campus. She likes to study on campus after class, however, she can't find the right kind of space to suit her approach to study.

She wants to be on campus more and says she would like there to be more informal opportunities to keep her there.

“It's great for me to talk out of class because in the class the teacher needs to talk to everyone.”

She talks about how much she values opportunities to talk with her lecturers to clarify specific points and also suggests it would be good to invite more guest speakers who could share their practical work experience.

Reflections

We live in a world where we are used to being productive, where everything seems to have a time and a place. We are used to managing our complex and connective lives, and our digital technologies ensure that no time needs to be wasted.

The danger is that we lose the quality of our lived experiences that we gain from being with other people.

Questions

1. How can students be encouraged to stay on campus to study? What are the benefits to them? What are 'good' places for informal study? Why?

Digital study circles

CJ discusses her use of digital video conference study circles using Zoom meetings for 'digital hangouts' with her fellow PhD researchers.

“We have Zoom Rooms [where] ...we will drop by during the day and it's different people every day. Well, there's three or four of us. [The Zoom call] can be open all day.”

She describes how she uses her large screen TV at home to have people who are in the Zoom Room present with her while she is studying.

“Then I do my work on the laptop and it's kind of an accountability thing. An online writing group.”

“[Zoom Rooms are] very, very popular with PhD students. I didn't realise it existed until about a year ago, and one of my friends got me into it.”

She mentions there are multiple Zoom Rooms. You have to pay for some like one called the PhD Circle, but some of them are free, initiated by groups of people who get on well together.

“We will open up our Zoom Rooms and keep an eye on each other. We have breaks after, say, half an hour or an hour and we will chat to each other about our goals and what we've done so we kind of motivate each other along a bit.”

Reflections

Working alongside friends, not only peers on your course, can be a good way to support each other. Zoom Rooms is just one approach. Other students go to the library together or hangout in cafes. Some use WhatsApp groups and other social media. Study groups might set themselves some ground rules to help them stay focused and on task, but not always. Designing in short breaks at agreed times can help people to stretch and shift their focus while grabbing a coffee or asking each other for help.

Questions

1. Who are your study buddies? How do you support each other? Are you on the same course?
2. Does technology help you to create an effective self-study space? What is it that works for you?
3. How could you adapt your good study habits to different situations? Is this something you could share with peers?

Paper-based or screen-based?

WS describes working between the physical and digital affordances of media. She is aware of how she wants to use her phone less and how the notebook is better for her time management.

“Oh yes, that Monday I really had a lot of stuff to do. I'm using this book, so I write down all my activities and times in it. I know what time exactly I need and then I'll write them down and arrange my time.

I use less of my phone to help me arrange my stuff. I think I use my notebook to write down my schedules.”

Once she has worked out her tasks and timings she puts them into a digital task management tool.

“Then every time I finish something I would click on it and then see, ‘Do I still have other time?’ Or, if I have other things to do, do I still have time for it?”

Reflections

Students have personal strategies for navigating the physical-digital materials and tools they use. Developing spatial fluency feels emergent – something that needs continual renegotiation. SW has a strategy and is developing effective habits for being effective by thinking about the relative affordances of tools and media she uses.

Questions

1. How can university experience support students to think critically about the tools and media they use in their study and professional lives?
2. To what extent should such strategies be personalised? To what extent should students expect to be given structures, methods, and tools for managing their study and work strategies?

Carving out spaces and working alongside others

CJ describes how she carves out time and space at home for study and digital displacement activities. Quoting author Helen Sword, she says,

I find I connect with my digital devices most happily, most productively, when I've got light and air and time and space.

As a mother, CJ finds herself, “looking after kids, driving kids here, there and everywhere, feeding everybody etc, making sure they're doing their homework...”

But she is clear about her need to carve out space for her study and for the other things she likes to do. She likes to be with her family in the evening, for example while they are watching TV. She is not so interested in what they like watching, but she notes, “We're always in the same room.” There is a compatibility in being together, even if people are focused on doing different things.

Reflections

CJ and her family know what works. CJ knows she can use her laptop and phone to get on with what she wants to do while everyone else are doing what they want. For CJ it is important they are together. While she might not be able to do focused study, she says she can use time for “some digital displacement activity” like doing the daily Wordle. Or she might get on with her academic work. She knows she has options, and this means time doesn't just drift away.

Questions

1. Think about the different types of study activity you have. Avoid tasks where the conditions are not going to be right for you. Save them until later. What needs focus? What is more administrative? What is compatible with others being around?

Reference

Sword, H. (2017). Air and light and time and space: How successful academics write. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Creating ‘focus time’ habits

CJ is a part-time PhD student and a foster carer. Her phone gives her the freedom to study while staying in touch with her domestic responsibilities. However, she also recognises that her phone usage is something that she needs to manage and she

feels uneasy about being “sucked in” to becoming dependent upon it in order to be productive.

“If you're not productive, then you're somehow failing.”

Her relationship with her phone seems both empowering and stressful, with productivity being common to both. She has responded by organising her phone so that her apps reflect her typical daily priorities.

“My home screen... it's all the ones I use, you know, three or even more times a day. And then I've got swipe-throughs of you know other pages. I tried to do it in the order in which I use them.”

She reflects on her priorities.

“It is a very subtle sign of the times and it has been for many years now that the first thing we want to do is kind of connect with people, with what we're going to do.

I do find myself checking WhatsApp more than I want to, so I've turned off the notifications to stop me sort of looking the whole time. But then I still find myself looking to see if there are any.”

CJ has developed strategies to help her focus. In addition to using an app to protect her from distractions during designated focus time, she reports how she has established personal ground rules and habits to help her manage her time. She turns her phone off when she is sitting at a desk in the Doctoral School and, instead, will use a laptop. “I try to put my phone out of reach and upside down,” she says. CJ says she has a rule that sitting at any desk, whether on campus or at home establishes the formality she needs for studying.

Equally, she has designated her bus journey between campus and home as a place where she can pay attention to her phone apps. It means she knows she will have space in her day to check the weather, her bank account, or social media.

Reflections

Most respondents in the study talk about how they designate and associate times and spaces for keeping on top of work, study, and social media. Establishing personal rules and habits seems to work. For some, being disciplined about taking short breaks is important. For some people, the breaks are ‘screen free’ – and for others, breaks taken in other rooms or outside are a chance to catch up with friends and family. CJ's regular bus journey has its own rule, and it helps her to focus on her study at other points in the day.

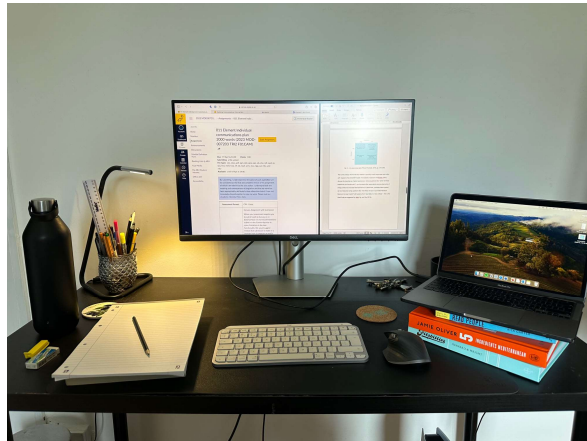
Questions

The physical spaces you use each day can help you to create rules for focus time and relaxation time. Could you make a list of what you need to focus on and things

you like to focus on? Where's the best place for each? Try to make some reasonable rules to guide you as you develop new habits.

Good intentions - from calm to chaos

YJ describes an intensive study day which begins with good intentions and good planning.



“I wanted to make sure that I had all the tools necessary to get me through the day of writing assignments.”

He has thought through his study plan. His aim is to carry out research using his module core textbook with online resources to support the development of his assignment case study which he is using as the basis for producing a final year essay.

Being clear about what he wants to achieve by the end of the day means he is calm and organised when he starts. He has made sure that everything he needs is to hand. This includes having his study snacks, fruit, and water bottle in place. His attitude and energy levels are right. However, he describes how, after a few hours,

“...everything's a bit chaotic. I took a break and I was like ...I felt quite chaotic in my mind. I was like, there was so much stuff I had to focus on ...I was trying to figure out, ‘OK, I can put this part of my essay there, but OK. But I need to add this in. I need to do this. I need to do this...’ and obviously wasn't doing that. I'm kind of snacking on some fruit, eating some crisps and then I was like... I felt very stressed.”

YJ says,

“It's quite difficult to maintain your focus for extended periods.”

Reflections

YJ is highly organised and seems surprised at how his day begins to fall into a state of ‘chaos’. The truth is, he has been working hard and has been more focused on his

work than he realised. He reflects how his excessive screentime is waring. He realises the daylight outside is closing in and he is anxious that time running away on him.

Staying effective for a sustained time requires having a good sleep beforehand, taking frequent breaks, making sure you get fresh air and daylight into the room, and making sure your eyes get a chance to refocus on objects away from the screen. Stretching your legs and flexing your neck help. So does standing up and walking around. YJ's water bottle and suitable study snack help but getting sustenance could provide him with a good reason to move away from the desk. Some people get so focused that their breathing becomes shallow, so remember to do some deep breathing.

Getting away from the PC can feel like a bad idea, but it's not. If it helps, write yourself a note so when you sit back down you know exactly how to start up again.

Provocation

1. We have to learn how to work effectively, especially when technology keeps our attention. Reflect on your screentime, your sleep patterns, and exercise. Work at developing good routines as bad habits have a tendency to run away with us.

Relative advantages – media and space

YJ is spending an intensive day working on an assignment. He is aware of the relative advantages of the spaces, materials, and tools he is using. He has options and it seems that any combination could suffice.

He compares using the printed core textbook on his desk at home with his use of the digital version of the same text. He has accessed it online from the University library. He describes how both are open.

“Sometimes if I don't want to keep flicking through pages and whatever, I have the online one up and I'll just kind of remember the page numbers and flick through those online.”

YJ says,

“I tend to work at home a lot more just because it's my environment.”

However, he mentions his deliberation at lunchtime. He was wondering if a change of setting could help to sustain his engagement in his academic task. He had considered moving into a café where he likes working with his headphones on. However, while the coffee is cheap and very nice,

“I've been spending so much more money on food and coffee as well.”

While he likes the security of home and how his home space gives him the control he needs to get the task done, he also likes a change of scene and the dynamic of being in public space. Then he notes,

“I think if there's one place to really describe what studying is like, it will be going to the library... Everything's old. Old books. It's silent and it's just really a good environment.”

Reflections

YJ's is committed to writing his essay. The options for where he should study indicate a moment of indecision, but he knows that a change of scene may give him a new energy and perspective.

Questions

1. Is YJ just prevaricating or is moving to a different space a strategy that you think will work for him? Is going to a new location going to use up precious time and energy? Is the public setting going to distract him? What would you do?
2. YJ's technology makes him mobile. He will leave his desk, his screen and his books at home, he can manage with his laptop using the library wifi. Will this help him to focus and get his work done? Or not?

Flipping and jockeying – taking the digital initiative

International Business student WS highlights how he makes good use of digital media on his course. His lecturer uses a 'flipped learning' approach.

“We are required to watch some videos. Some of them are from YouTube and some of the videos the teacher recorded themselves.”

His lecturer engages the students in class by providing printed handouts to prompt group work to complement the PowerPoint. Having guidance on paper serves as a practical reminder for SW.

“Normally I will prepare for the next week, and besides that, I will read more about the questions that I don't understand.”

He likes to read around the topics because some of the lectures involve students from several courses.

“So during the class I need to search while the teacher is talking about some specific term. I need to look on Google myself so I can learn more.”

After class WS continues to follow links he found during class.

Reflections

Integrating media into teaching and learning activities helps to signal to students how topics can be developed through a range of media. Media, including YouTube clips, can be a good way to open up the curious thinker seeking to make connections with other learning. 'Google jockeying', searching to clarify meaning while listening to a lecture or being involved in an activity, can be a useful strategy for students, especially when their first language is not English.

Questions

1. How are students advised to find and manage information they discover through Google searches in class and after class?
2. How can digital media work as a multiple media and multimodal learning strategy on your course?
3. Does paper still have a legitimate role in a digital classroom?

Different spaces for different people

There is a well-known saying - "If you want something done, ask a busy person." There is some truth in that. Busy people have learnt to be efficient, they are motivated, and will not make a fuss about taking on just one more job amongst many.

WF is busy. She works part time alongside being a student and a mother, as well as maintaining her friendship network. But it's not all about being busy – WF is just clear about how she likes everything to fit together.

"I prefer to work digitally with people that I don't know. So if I go to the doctors, I don't really want to talk to the doctor's receptionist. I'd rather just type in my name and not talk to a human. So that is better for me."

She says, she has some friends who she prefers speaking to on the phone, rather than face-to-face.

"I can talk to them really easily without, you know, without seeing a face. But as soon as I'm with them, the flow of the conversation isn't as nice as it is on the phone. I noticed that a lot."

Then she describes friends who she just likes to message on Instagram.

"It's so strange. Like the different friends ...the ways we communicate are different, you know."

She reflects on how studying fits into her approach to keeping up with her friends.

"I would not be able to talk to a friend while I was focusing on an essay or any work. I don't answer my phone to friends, and if I do, I

say, 'I'm working. I'll call you back later'. And then I definitely think it's good for me to have long, sociable conversations."

She's learnt to be organised.

"I'm always preparing for the next step... I definitely I have to compartmentalise things to the point where if I'm zoning out on Instagram reels, it can only be for about 10 minutes. ...I have to think about the next day and what does everyone need for the next day, like packed lunches or uniform for something you know. So I think I'm always organising my time down to the half hour."

Reflections

Not everyone needs to be as organised as WF and, for many people, being so busy would feel quite stressful. Nevertheless, becoming a student requires a rebalancing of commitments. Social media, and digital media in general, will be part of that mix and they can be both life-enhancing and distracting. Being a student also means different things to different people and, as the course changes, so must a student's strategy for keeping things in balance.

Questions

1. Managing your social life is too important to be an afterthought. What works for you? Are you and your friends good at respecting each other's space?
2. What are your preferences for working with others and meeting people? Is this something you negotiate with them?

TEACHING EXPERIENCES

A multimodal disruption

JA shares a photograph of his phone. He says he is aware that his life, in many ways, revolves around the phone.

“The first thing I reach for is the phone. There's an interplay in my life between the phone and everything I do.”

The next photograph he shares is of his arrival at the leisure centre.

“Yet again, I'm reaching into my pocket because the way I enter into the leisure centre is [through the] QR code on my phone.”

He remembers, not so long ago, having a physical alarm clock and having a gym membership card.

“I remember having to go up to a physical person and saying, ‘I'm checking in.’ That's all different now. It's all automated. No one has to be present when you go in.”

He observes how most things are now done through an app. For example,

“I went to Chester Zoo last week and the first thing that you did was download an app and then the whole zoo map is on an app... [but] there were still occasions in the day where we stopped off at the big ‘you are here’ [sign].”

Reflections

The digital interface has become the normal space through which we mediate so much of what we do. The material ‘real world’ space has a different quality. In life generally, we are used to working between the two. But what should our direction of travel be in higher education?

Questions

1. Do we manage to prioritise time together on campus? How?
2. Some situations can be easily modernised by using digital technologies like phones and QR Codes? How do such approaches enhance or detract from the experiences we need and want?

Media as catalyst

During a field trip in North India GA shared a photograph she had taken of a stark sign in an antenatal ward in a local hospital. It pronounced that ‘Disclosure & Selection of the Sex of the foetus is prohibited under the law’. Her students mentioned it and discussed how unfair the law



was. It prompted a discussion. GA asked her students to, “Have a think about all the things that you've seen happening in school this week. You know, how many girls and how many boys are at the school? How are boys treated compared to how girls are treated?” After a while it became clear to them all how social values and realities would result in the girls being aborted.

“It was a really memorable bit of learning for the group that we had there.”

Reflections

There is something both inconsequential and yet profound in the capture of the sign on a mobile phone. It was easy-to-do yet it seeded a deep realisation about the social complexities it represented. Photographs can be both highly objective while being catalysts for highly emotive and nuanced discussion. Visual media, in various forms, can be used as data and to present data. Individual photographs or collections of photographs, provided by the tutor, the student, or others, can ignite deep learning by eliciting multiple perspectives.

Questions

Beyond adding colour to your content,

1. How can photographs and other graphic media be used to open up discussion and deepen learning in your course?
2. How can your students use the cameras in their smart devices to gather data?
3. How can photographic assignments and activities be used to provide alternative assessments?
4. How can the act of captioning graphic media deepen learning?

Significant situations and embodied learning

GA's students volunteer for a community-based field trip in which there are mutual benefits for the students and the community. Over the week spent with a semi-nomadic tribe in India, her students used their knowledge and skills to support the community to develop their knowledge about hygiene to address all sorts of health issues. At the same time, working to help the community is the basis of a rich learning experience in which students are able to reflect on the greater meaning of the knowledge they have shared.

She describes a demonstration of washing hands by taking ash from the wood fire as an effective and available cleanser.

“It was a sort of ‘aha’ moment for all the students and for all the people in the room – ‘Actually we need to rub a bit of ash on our hands and it will make them clean.’ And so the students got that - and they will never forget it. You could tell them 100 times that the single most effective way to improve health within villages is to get

them to wash their hands with soap. First of all, they're likely to forget it. And secondly, they don't understand. There's often no access to soap. So actually, being in the room, seeing it unfold in front of them and seeing the gasps of, 'Oh, yeah, it's gone,' in this little dark hut will just stay with them forever."

She says,

"When you're in a formal learning environment, you're focusing in really on the cognitive side of learning. You know it's all about their head... but if you actually take them to [a real world situation] and allow them to observe, and without prompting them a great deal, just ask for their responses of what just happened, you start to see them working it out for themselves and then discussing or having conversations about what just went on... 'What was that happening?', 'Oh, I didn't understand that that was happening. I can see that now...' So, it's more of a whole body learning experience. And I think you can only do that outside the classroom."

Reflections

In this example, the situation itself drives the learning experience, being shaped significantly by the non-formal authentic setting and the lives of people beyond the course. The identities of the students themselves are shifted along with the change of scene and its authentic context. Learning is embodied and affective. By reflecting in and on their experiences, students' knowledge becomes meaningful and transformative. The experience will form memories that last a lifetime.

Questions

1. Think about significant situations – places and events that have stuck with you for life. What is it about them that makes them significant? How can you apply this to your own educational experience?

Physicality, digitality and performance

JA started his working life as a golf coach. He talks about the need to manage the energy you expend as a coach so that the last tutee of the day has as much of you as the first one in the day, when you were still feeling fresh. Pacing yourself is a teaching skill too. It requires paying close attention to your energy levels and your physical wellbeing.

JA goes on to talk about feeling physically immersed in an activity. He reflects on his morning swim.

"It's such a physical thing that you do, swimming. There's no technology at all around you. You're just focused. It is a real mental health thing for me. It really does chill me out. It's a good start to the day. Really helps me."

He's also very interested in digital technologies and media. The apps on his phone are part of everything he does. He refers to a sports health app he uses – “a digital personal trainer.”

“Obviously I do check on my phone as I'm going along and I've noticed it does allow me to then push myself... now I can literally record to the minute, to the second, to the metre, what I'm doing.”

He has used his digital skills to develop interactive digital assets.

“I use H5P to create ...things like leader boards and badging. You're not just competing against yourself, you can compete with others in your class.”

He admits that, on reflection, he does not think leader boards are positive motivational devices in education. He thinks they may detrimentally impact on those placed lower on the board as such boards focus only on those who believe they have a chance of winning.

Reflections

Educators often refer to the exhilarating sense of flow a person can experience when immersed in a thoroughly engaging and skilful activity. JA reflects on the physical and literal experience of being immersed when swimming. Anthropologists talk about the sense of *communitas* that a community can experience when working in unison (Turner, 2012). Some educators talk about ipsative assessment which, as can be the case with sport, challenges a person to beat their personal best. (Hughes, 2017) Digital technologies can promote deep engagement, but often they can obstruct it. Technology and media should not be accepted on face value, but when considered imaginatively and critically they can contribute to wonderful experiences.

Questions

1. Can educators learn from digital games? If so, what qualities should we look for?

References

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Imagining the classroom

DP designs simulation-based learning environments. Doing so requires him to be aware of spatial affordances and their tensions – how space can support or undermine the teaching philosophy.

He says it comes down to whether you are setting out to direct the student through prescribed paths and processes, or whether the problem or scenario needs to be explored through an open-ended approach. How do you imagine the student as they interrogate the space, make decisions, make mistakes, review their goals and progress, and deal with the complexities certainties or ambiguities afforded by the space? Are they working alone or together? What actually is the teaching role in this?

Being able to imagine the student in the simulation suite seems obvious. But shouldn't imagining the student in any learning space be a good way in to designing learning? Such an approach leads to student-centred designs in which the student becomes agent of their learning.

DP discusses his approach and frustrations in developing simulated environments. He says that spatial affordances (how different kinds of space affect behaviours) have a huge impact on behaviour. He refers to,

“...the difficulties we've had when we tried to shoe-in content that was developed with one set of affordances and types of agency in mind into a different modality. We were taking some digital content that was supposed to be consumed asynchronously by students working independently... and we're being asked to put it into an Igloo room [immersive simulation suite].

He says external expectations and guidelines from the PSRB determined how the learning needed to be done in a more practical way. The immersive nature and the digital 'dressing up' and context-making aspects of the approach were not appreciated. He was told, “there needs to be less digital scaffolding.” He reflects a great sense of frustration.

“A lot of the decisions surrounding the kinds of simulation content that we were asked to produce come from a competency position rather than [from] the pedagogy.”

Learning is often space-specific, but he finds that the people responsible for administering space design and allocating space can be quite reductionist. They understand teaching as a matter of content delivery. In higher education, knowledge is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Learning is an outcome of a students' exploration, experimentation, and interrogation. Facts need to be tested, processes need to be run, knowledge needs to be contextualised, challenged and developed, and skills need to be practiced.

To learn deeply, a student needs to be involved. DP says experience,

“...has to be embedded right from the beginning in how we make that content and piece it together.”

Reflections

DP clarifies how learning space design can inadvertently determine teaching and learning. Sometimes constraints are useful, but usually they obstruct what we want to do pedagogically.

DP's story highlights the connection between space and how people learn. How people learn and how the space amplifies learning effects its quality. This is true in all types of learning space – the space acts as a setting with scenery. As such, space influences and can determine the learning narrative.

Questions

1. Do you imagine your students' interaction when you are designing teaching sessions? How does this help you to communicate your expectations for engagement to your students? How does it effect your room layout and decisions about using groupwork?
2. Do you agree with DP that your teaching reflects the facilities you are given? If so, how can you influence what space you are allocated and how can you influence improvements being made to facilities?

Shock of the new

“I was taken aback ...it was almost physically like I walked into my office and my office had been painted without me knowing.”

This was JA's reaction to the updating of his Teams environment by Microsoft.

“I thought, you know, throughout the day, I'm constantly, constantly going from physical to digital quite fluently ...with the phone and ... you often get that in the physical space ...I've never had it so drastic where in that virtual technological space something changed. And it really did affect me and then throughout that meeting ...we were chatting about it as if a new building had been put up all of a sudden.”

Reflections

JA's 'shock' is an example of place attachment. The significance of place attachment is the readiness and need of humans to settle into a normality. Usually, we don't need to and don't like to pay too much attention to the environment. However, spatial fluency requires a critical awareness of the spaces we use so that we can confidently and successfully get what we need from the spaces and the places we inhabit. This applies to physical and digital spaces and, importantly, to those spaces where the physical and digital experience intersect and combine. Increasingly, this means any space.

Questions

1. Look at the space you are in. How does it shape your behaviour and your mood? What 2 or 3 things could you do right now to make the space work

- better for you? e.g. open or close the window, adjust your chair, tidy your desk, free up space by deleting photos on your phone, finding a good task app, etc
2. How can you refresh your digital space to make it more inviting for you? Here are some ideas:
 - a. get on top of your email and find a new way of managing the tasks and information they contain.
 - b. organise your files – come up with an approach that works for your home, work, study, and leisure interests.
 - c. Feel confident about digital security including having and implementing back up, archiving, and virus protection strategies.
 - d. Talk to others about what works, or doesn't, for them.
 - e. Etc
 3. Think about place attachment in your life. What's important for you when you are studying, working, or relaxing? For example, consider light, smells, noises, furniture, technologies, storage, ventilation, connectivity, ornaments, flowers, distractions.

Placemaking and the benefits of being together face-to-face

GA describes the reciprocal nature of learning in the field with community health workers in northern India.

“The hospital had set up this clinic about an hour and a half away from the main hospital. It serves as a centre that brings together all the community outreach health workers. The health workers were all going to come together when we were there so that [healthcare student] could again provide them with some really basic training on what to do if one of the women in your village becomes pregnant or what to do if one of the women in the village comes to you because they can't get pregnant, or they have a miscarriage.

So we talked very broadly during the day about pregnancy, nutrition, and hygiene. The community health workers came from quite a large area and probably travelled two or three hours, some of them on the backs of motorbikes and jeeps to come together. So it was amazing for [healthcare student] to be able to provide some of her knowledge to that community. But she was also really interested in what was already going on and the local knowledge that these amazing people had and how effective they were being at supporting pregnant women in their community.”

Reflections

GA's story describes how place can act as a magnet that brings people together. The expectation and experience of learning is that, by being together, it will flow in multiple directions exemplifying the idea of non-formal learning in which individual

and social expectations for learning coalesce. The space, like the facilitator, offers reason and value for the learning with formal instruction providing some scaffold; however, a level playing field emerges as self-directed and networked approaches and outcomes grow out of the occasion. GA observes, “some external person coming and taking an interest in them was seen as something fantastic,” helping participants to value themselves where others didn’t. The sharing and networked experience was enhanced by the sharing of food, creating a conviviality. Even with rudimentary fittings and equipment the social setting establishes a conducive ambience.

Questions

1. Place can convey meaning and foster communal identity. What spaces hold meaning for you and your peers? How can you develop a sense of communal place?
2. It can be hard to find a reason to come together in person, especially with digital connections allow us to be apart. How can you and your peers develop strategies that recognise the mutual benefits of being together?
3. How can communal spaces be designed to reflect the people who use them?

Doing the impossible? Being present in two places at once

CN describes how she attended two important events at the same time.

“I was in a whole day event ...for our Ruskin module leaders. I was also in the middle of, kind of listening into the judging session for our VC awards.”

For the first, she was there to ‘pick up information’ and take some photographs. For the second, CN explains she is responsible for writing the citations for the awards. However, last year, “we got in a bit of a muddle because I wasn’t attending the meetings.” She ended up doing a lot of duplicate work unnecessarily.

This year she made sure she was present for the panel discussions by connecting online while attending the Ruskin module event.

“So, I was kind of listening in on my headphones, turning it up more and more, trying to be present in both. But yeah, it didn’t work!”

She reflects that her strategy had been to tune in and out for the awards panel, paying attention to summary conversations about the winners. In the live ‘in-person’ event, however, CN says she was conscious of not wanting to disturb the session.

“I was just trying to be there without disrupting, I suppose ...I probably should have excused myself earlier and gone to a quieter place because it was difficult to be in both.”

Reflections

CN's story highlights some of the different dimensions of 'being present'. Attending, paying attention, demonstrably engaging, and being responsible for producing outputs are all evident here. CN also observes how her presence could disturb proceedings – how her obvious inattentiveness could itself be disruptive to others. Similar conflicts are noted by other respondents, especially where their expectations for student engagement are not congruent with their students' own expectations.

Questions

1. In what circumstances is it viable and effective to be in two places at once?
2. How reasonable is it to expect others to attend or engage in more than one synchronous activity?
3. How do online meeting technologies increase access to learning, for example students with caring responsibilities? How can expectations for engagement be moderated?

Keeping safe in a threatening situation

KL is a Director of Studies. He is an experienced and affable colleague who takes delight in 'owning the room' and communicating with his students. His role means he has to meet with students to discuss sensitive matters including their non-engagement or reports of misconduct. In this story he discusses, not only how meeting his students online in Teams creates more privacy, but also how it is safer.

KL describes how he had been threatened by a student. He explains this is the only time he has felt so unsafe with a student.

"I actually think the distance and the fact that it was online was beneficial. If I'd have been face-to-face, [I wonder] how much of the verbal threat might have become a physical threat? I don't know. The body language of the student was exceptionally aggressive throughout and he kept coming right into the camera, and so all I could see was his eyes and I felt that was very threatening."

Not only was KL protected by the distance, but the affordances of the digital environment helped him to address the situation.

"I just pressed the record button [in Teams] and got evidence that he had been abusive and threatening."

He notes a shift in student anxiety and bad behaviour. He says he understands the frustration of the student in this case because it was a second, exceptionally serious example of misconduct. The student had crossed the threshold for expulsion from the university. However, KL was keen to reassure the student and show him how much he cared.

“I'm trying to help him. I'm trying to say this is what is open to you. These are your options, but all he kept doing was saying that I'd ruined his life and that I had not done my job properly.”

“At the time, I was scared. I don't mind admitting.”

Reflections

While KL's story is alarming, it raises questions about how online spaces can be more private, safer, more accessible, remote and alienating. In this sense, they are neither good or bad, just different. Attention needs to be given to the spatial affordances of the Teams meeting, in this instance. It should have helped to give both parties confidence and to take some of the heat out of what was inevitably a stressful situation. On the other hand, KL notes that potentially valuable body language and paralinguistics are limited by the online environment. In this case, however, it may be that the student felt free to show his anger.

Spaces affect our behaviours.

Questions

1. To what extent do you pay attention to the state of minds of those people around you? How can their mood and attitude be affected by the space? What adjustments can you make to improve the experience of those who struggle? - to the room and its ambient conditions, the technologies, the structure of the session, the opportunity people have to engage, etc.?
2. KL was compassionate, but he was badly affected by the experience? How would you have reacted before, during, or after the meeting?

Digital media - what would you do with a clean slate?

JK works at ARU Peterborough which was established in 2022 as a new, modern, purpose-built university offering a range of higher education and professional development courses. It operates in association with Anglia Ruskin University and has had the advantage of being able to start afresh while leaning from the experiences, processes, and systems provided through its relationship with ARU.

“We obviously started with almost a clean slate when we first opened ARU Peterborough. It gave us that opportunity to provision new and innovative materials for our Canvas platform. YuJa [the institutional media system] was one of the things that I have focused on.”

JK is an experienced teacher who developed her new course during the COVID lockdown which influenced her commitment to using digital media to enrich her teaching. She talks about exploiting YuJa.

“I find the flexibility ...really helpful and I'm starting to learn to use it more creatively.”

She has created a number of different videos for her Contract Law module which can be used either as standalone videos addressing topics or as embedded revision playlists. Equally, she explains how she can select two or three of those to use in Canvas, the University's Learning Management System.

"It's an ongoing development. What I'm now also looking at doing with YuJa is to utilize the Creativity tools whereby I could embed quizzes for students watching those videos in their independent learning time."

Reflections

It can be hard to integrate new pedagogies, especially where the technologies inspire all sorts of ambitions. Even with a clean slate and a requirement to develop content to convey key ideas, JK's experience convinced her to take a staged approach so that she builds a solid foundation that she can evaluate before developing the bigger ideas she has. Often technology and media are not simply matters of new modes of delivery, they involve pedagogic shifts which need to be evaluated and adjusted. She is keen to develop an approach for integrating feed forward and feedback comments through her video quiz design next.

Questions

1. What digital innovation would you do with a clean slate? How would you plan to develop the approach over time? How would you evaluate your innovation in terms of looking at both pedagogic and technical innovation? What is stopping you from getting started?
2. Digital media is time-based and straightforward to produce. Perhaps its greatest strength is to bring voices into the learning experience. Whose voices would you and your students like to hear?

The affordances of online spaces and media

BS discusses her use of online teaching and administrative spaces. She expresses interest for systems that are well-designed and some frustration with those that aren't. She says she likes the University's learning management system, Canvas.

"It's so much better than what we had before. It's so much more user friendly for both doctors and students. You can have some pictures, videos. And I'm quite happy with the new YuJa [digital media] system."

She finds MS Teams "quite interesting" and enjoyable. It creates "a different dynamic."

Introduced with great urgency as an online social learning space during the pandemic, Teams continues to be used. All Level 5 students use it for their mandatory interdisciplinary 'Ruskin modules'. It ensures that students from any

campus can learn together. BS teaches one of these modules and observes some of its disadvantages.

“The students don't really get to know each other. It's too big a group. But I quite like instant breakout rooms and being able to send instant messages to every breakout group.”

The procurement of teaching and learning systems is carefully considered, but BS observes this does not appear to be the case for some essential administrative systems. She riles against the “awful, awful application” used for business administration.

Reflections

People tend to have strong feelings about badly designed online tools where the functionality and the aesthetic rub them up the wrong way. The same is true for physical spaces too, and physical spaces also have a tendency to get worn around the edges as seating and decoration shows its age, and discarded technologies await renewal. The provision of spaces can be inconsistent and eventually lack coherence. While strategies, budgets, and renewal cycles affect infrastructure, it is useful to reflect on the parts of the estate where we do have control – the media we use for teaching and learning, how we present, and our strategies for refreshing our content.

Questions

1. Your students experience diverse modules and taught experiences. How is their navigation of these experiences helped by ensuring coherence and consistency in the organisation of online materials across their course and in the approach to incorporating media?

Modally fluent and agile

Technology emerges, does not come fully formed, and is inevitably part of a mixed and messy economy. This is the reality faced by any academic and one that requires academics to be spatially fluent and flexible.

SA discusses the lab he has been assigned this year. It's an older facility compared to the new SuperLab he sometimes uses. The latter was designed with technology in mind. They are not equivalent spaces.

Digital screens have been put up in recent years in the older lab. Unlike the more modern SuperLab, the screens have been superimposed onto what was originally designed for pre-digital age teaching. The way the screens have been mounted means that the students can't look at the person leading the session while they are looking at the screens. In the newer lab, the repeater screens are integral to the design.

SA gives another example of spatial design that struggles to keep pace with digitally-enhanced pedagogy. He uses Team-based Learning (TBL), which is a small group active learning strategy in which student team members negotiate their understandings of conceptual knowledge before jointly committing to it. TBL involves students working through a series of in-class quizzes, first individually and then as a team.

“The discussions are usually pretty fantastic.”

TBL works best in facilities designed to accommodate students working in their 6-person groups seated around a tear drop table. The tables have integrated screens. The technology, the table design, and the seating all combine to optimise student experience of engaging in the activity.

“Having students sitting [so they can] work in groups and having tables that facilitate that ...is transformative. It really does facilitate discussion.”

However, despite ARU investing in developing many high quality TBL rooms, demand for the rooms cannot always be matched.

SA tells how he was using TBL on the day he chose for this study. He refers to a photograph he took of the classroom he had been allocated for the day: thin tables with forward-facing chairs set out in rows with no integrated technologies.

“Students know they have to do teamwork. One or two groups do move the tables and sit around as a group, and that's good. Others sit in a row, which just means the people at the ends don't talk to each other.”

Reflections

While SA is frustrated by his room allocation this year, he is an experienced teacher committed to active learning. Being well-versed in the pedagogical principles of active learning means he knows how to adapt. He does not allow the technical space to determine his practice and instead evaluates the space and its effect on student engagement.

Provocation

Teaching involves agility. Understanding how pedagogical principles, the design of the physical space, and the available technologies can work together makes the teacher more agile and able to adapt. Review how pedagogy, space and technology can make you more agile.

WORKING FUTURES

Digital flexibility – a matter of give and take

CN commutes by train to campus. The short journey is an opportunity to catch up, get on top of things and prepare for work or focus on more personal things like reading books on her phone.

She says she feels fine with doing work on the train, but she also says it's a, "space to think and have a proper break before we start work ...I do need that outside time as well."

Because the train can be packed, she finds herself using her phone rather than her laptop to check emails or read books on the train.

"I use my phone way too much, like I read books and stuff on my phone as well. So, you know, I'm used to very small screens."

However, CN explains that her eyesight is changing and she was recently prescribed reading glasses. She is still getting used to relying on them and making sure she has them with her.

"Recently I've managed to get a hold of a work phone as well. So that's been really good. Just because separating things out a little bit from personal to work has been helpful I'd say. So just things like taking photos on my personal phone, it was taking up a lot of space and I was deleting stuff and getting rid of things by mistake ...now it's two spaces, if you see what I mean."

Having a work phone and a personal phone helps to separate work and home while on the move, but also helps with managing data and storage.

"I have got quite a lot of data that I can use on my personal phone. But it's just handy not to have to rely on it if you don't have to."

If she is using her laptop on her commute, the work phone ensures she doesn't have to use up her personal data through tethering, or running down her battery.

Reflections

CN's story is indicative of the 'give and take' many people experience as workers nowadays, where boundaries are easily crossed and eroded.

The changes in CN's eyesight remind us how our circumstances change beyond our control. Such changes can require a renegotiation of time, space, and expectations.

Questions

Thinking about study, work, or life in general,

1. How do personal devices extend opportunities for you to stay engaged with study, work, or home responsibilities? Do you regard this as a flexibility that helps you to manage your day or as a flexibility that imposes unwanted expectations upon you?
2. If technologies extend your reach to help you manage your responsibilities, and also the reach of others to call upon you, do you need to establish 'boundaries' – ground rules for yourself and others? If so, what might these look like?
3. How do, or can, technologies allow you or others to adapt to changing personal circumstances?

The Commute to the home office

TT has had a garden home office constructed. This represents a considerable investment in a new work modality. While previously an investment in a PC or smart device may have surfaced doubts about who should be paying for the work infrastructure, the construction of the Home Office symbolises TT's investment in her own working future. It helps to clarify how working arrangements are being accepted as a deliberation of a professional person's life quality. Such decisions are a matter for families, especially where space in the family home is limited. Tensions about 'bread-winning' and care arrangements are inevitable for many.

TT reflects on squatter's rights in the family home.

"It's really important for me to have the Home Office because for a good two years we've got an office in the house, which my husband literally took squatting rights in [during] the pandemic and I was [confined] to the conservatory and my dining room table. And I never felt away from work ... I couldn't put my books away. I couldn't put my computers away. I didn't have... I mean, this is also my music room space. But now I can turn my computer off. I can leave all my equipment in here."

This new freedom is, ironically, in contrast to what has happened on campus where the University has shifted to developing impersonal shared 'agile spaces' and 'hot desks'. There is storage for books and bags, but that ability to stand up and walk away at the end of the day or when having a break has been lost.

In the garden office, TT says,

"I can have my breakfast, bring my cup of tea down here, start my day of work. I can actually walk back into the house for my lunch. In the evening, I can actually close [the office door] and I can go away. And it's a much healthier way of being."

She reflects,

"Just working from the house stressed me because I was never away from my work... To me this is my workspace. And sometimes you know, in the evening I'll come back and I'll play my harp. I'm very fortunate, aren't I?"

Reflections

Work-life arrangements are being renegotiated post-pandemic. Line managers and their staff have shared a disruptive experience, one which demonstrated their capabilities to cope and to innovate and to get the job done. Presenteeism has been replaced by over-productivity – a desire to demonstrate one’s worth in a way that deals with the dilemma of being ‘out of sight and out of mind.’ Consequently, occurrences of post-pandemic stress and anxiety arise, compounded by irregular access to in-person and informal contact. The postdigital world is struggling to replace the water-cooler and the photocopier moment.

Questions

The new freedom of the home office is welcomed by TT, as similar investments are welcomed by other professionals. It is an assertive move and one that requires a renegotiation of work and working arrangements.

1. What details need to be renegotiated, with whom, and to what end?
2. What is lost by the worker in this bid for the ‘new freedom’?
3. Who are the winners and who are the losers in the ‘new freedom’? How can this be ameliorated?

Investing in work – renegotiating technologies and space

When BL started in her current role as an academic developer several years ago, she was given an “ancient iPad that was basically useless.” She gave it back and decided to invest in an iPad for herself because she thought it would be really useful to her. And then she bought an Apple Pencil.

“Almost everyone who knows me will know I almost always have my iPad and my pencil, and I’m scribbling notes. People have come to identify me with note-taking on an iPad.”

Colleagues have been envious and have wondered if *their* work department should buy them one too. In this, there is an assumption that the organisation is responsible for the technologies its staff uses. For BL, it’s more personal – her technical space represents an interweaving of personal and professional identity. She explains,

“I really, really need this. If I don’t have it, I feel lost because I try to record as much as I can... like all of us, I have so many different conversations every day I just don’t remember everything at all... If I have the desire and the means to make my work life easier, I will.”

BL noted how she had discussed the iPad acquisition with her husband before purchasing it, reflecting a slight sense of transgression – a boundary being crossed.

She also notes the problems of carrying mobile technologies and how she has to think carefully about where she parks her car and how much this will cost. Carrying a heavy bag is quite difficult for her due to back pain; something she confides is getting

worse for her. Nevertheless, she is prepared to spend more on parking charges too to make working life a little better.

BL discusses how she has also invested in a desk that allows her to sit or stand when working at home – another boundary crossed.

Working life is a personal matter to BL – if something is not working for her in one domain, it will affect the other.

Reflections

Individuals and organisations need to be able to negotiate working arrangements, and their change over time. BL explains how technologies are integral to her personal and professional lives. People invest time in skills, money in equipment, and dedicate space in the home to work. With each investment, boundaries are crossed, disrupted, and rebalanced. Such changes bring mutual benefits and redefine professionalism. Work clothes, commuting costs, food on the go have changed too over recent years – there is something of a *quid pro quo* in this perhaps.

Questions

1. How has your investment in work redefined what home is in your life? How does this continue to change? How do you manage this with the people who share your home?
2. Not everyone is confident about broaching such subjects with work, or with families. What would make it easier?

Bouncing ideas and building relationships – ‘in-between’ modalities

TT appreciates her new working arrangements: her home office in the garden that doubles as a music room and gym. But she readily reflects on what she has lost since the balance of her working day has shifted away from campus-based life.

“There's no doubt you waste a lot of time and it's incredibly stressful travelling between campuses, and you achieve a lot less. But on the downside, [when working remotely] you don't have the time building up relationships. So the people I know really well are the people that were around before the pandemic that I've known for years. Because you can't have that conversation, can you? ...When you're in an online meeting, you can't have the sideline conversation that you have when you're going to get your cup of coffee or you're walking, you know, those walks [across] campus... You'd walk with colleagues. You'd have really interesting discussions ...in the coffee area. But I can't replicate that now.”

TT describes how she arranged to meet a colleague on campus the previous week.

“We wanted to meet and speak about something particular together, and I just thought it'd be really nice to go and see her when she was on campus ...It's only a 10-minute cycle ride into Cambridge... There's no point in sitting in a room when there's nobody actually there. But if somebody says to me, come along to campus, none of the campuses are more than an hour's drive for me. So it's not that difficult. But I don't want to go back to the day where we have to sit in the office for the sake of sitting in the office.”

She describes how it is nearly impossible to arrange an on-campus meeting that involves a team who have to travel in from far and wide.

“You know, what's the point really?”

She concludes,

“I do think I probably need to be on campus a little bit more to actually be with the people that you can bounce off and you can generate ideas from. It's really, really nice to have those opportunities.”

Reflections

Like so many others, TT voices a tension between a working life that is now weighted to home-based convenience and productivity, while she mourns the loss of having a more socially intimate working life. We are in an in-between time where the modalities of the physical world are still being negotiated by individuals.

Questions

1. Will this 'in-between' time reach a resolution? Will a 'new normality' establish itself? Are 'new normalities' something that each person needs to negotiate individually or should we be seeking to establish a consensus, at least amongst our peers?
2. If interpersonal engagement with co-workers has been eroded, can we look to our family, friends, neighbours, and home communities to redress our loss of real human contact?
3. Can work organisations, like universities, do more to foster a sense of belonging amongst co-workers who mostly work remotely?

Reasons to come in or stay away

CN tries to make every Monday a day to work from the office.

“It's just nice to actually catch up in person with colleagues and, like today, you can hear in the background, it's fairly busy. So that's a good day to come in. But on Friday, you can see the office was just empty. So, it just depends what you're trying to get out of the day, I suppose. But generally, it's a kind of social side of things as well today - see people face-to-face. It's different, isn't it?”

CN says being in the office is typically less productive,

“I don't think there's any particular benefit, to be honest ...actually, I'll probably get more done at home than I do in the office just because of the nature of things. You know, you can concentrate better and be quiet.”

She is also concerned about overhearing conversations or being overheard. She says that she has noticed how some of the interviews she conducted online with students recently were much more perfunctory when she was located in the office. Similar interviews conducted from home were twice the length,

“I felt a lot more relaxed and learnt a lot more. I was able to drill deeper with stuff and go a bit more personal into things I suppose, whereas here in the office, I felt that was very, very difficult. ...Even if a colleague wasn't listening, it didn't matter, it was just the way it made me feel.”

Reflections

CN indicates how we are sensitive to the spaces we use and how spaces are not usually interchangeable. They need to be chosen according to the task in hand. For CN, Mondays tend to be more about socialising and the rest of the week is about getting things done. Having people around is likely to be distracting – this can be nice, or it can be frustrating.

Questions

1. What noises distract you? What noises help you to focus?
2. How do other ambient situations affect your ability to work or study? Think about sound and acoustics, daylight and lighting, furnishing, décor, smells, people, technologies and media, access to food and drink, views through windows, etc.
3. How are the tasks you are responsible for better suited to particular spaces and times?
4. How is digital interaction affected by where you are located physically?
5. What types of spaces does a university need to provide on campus?

Personalising professionalism

BS is an experienced academic who has devised ways of working with technology that suit her. She discusses her frustration with changes imposed on her that have disrupted the processes she has developed over years to support her research into early literature.

“One of the things I have to do is transcribe the early print, which is quite difficult to read and put it into a Word document. I need to check it a lot, so it's always fantastic having [2 screens] side by side ...Just being able to copy and paste really easily, directly from one screen to the other. I just don't get on with having the small work laptop and

this [one] large screen. It's just not the right setup. It doesn't work so well for me... I would prefer just to keep my old setup. And what was frustrating was that everything was working fine. I didn't need anything new, but I had it replaced by something that cost money, but was actually less appropriate for me.”

Reflections

BS's story highlights how the technology we use becomes part of our 'personal-professional' way of being. It demonstrates an overlooked tension that exists between the provision of work infrastructure and the creation of a working environment as being a matter of professional agency. As with respondents BL and TT, SB highlights the conflict hidden in the idea of investment and the power of spatial affordances. The provision of infrastructure and the management of technology are a necessary part of running a large organisation like a university, however, approaches to achieving this can be technocentric to the extent that the quality of professional experience can be undermined. This tension may explain why working from home is so attractive to many who enjoy and benefit from having the control they feel they need to get work done.

Questions

Work has always been a negotiation, albeit often expressed in terms of contractual obligations.

1. A professional agrees to invest knowledge, skills, time and energy in work. How are lines of investment changed or exchanged in the 'new normalities' of the post-pandemic postdigital age?
2. How are worker's rights affected by new normalities? How should they be safeguarded? By whom?

Taking a break - negotiating the work-home space

Spatial fluency is about navigating and negotiating how and where you study, work, and manage your life in general. Our lives are not as compartmentalised as they used to be.

JA is keen to talk about his strategy for taking a break during the working day. Taking a break needs to be a switching off of focus and he, like others, achieves this by going into a different room. For him, the act of walking downstairs from his home office is a significant act, but he also notes he has “lunch downstairs and watches a bit of television as well.”

“When lockdown first happened me and my wife were working from home. One of us actually was working on the dining room table, just off the lounge, and one of us was in this office, and then we'd swap. But we actually found it really hard at the end of the day, to close the lid and then still be in the lounge and in that space. It was really difficult.”

Like others, they eventually converted their spare room into an office with the aim of physically removing themselves from work. Even so, he notes,

“There are still times if we have meetings at the same time where one of us does have to go into a different room.”

Reflections

Work and study are significant parts of our day-to-day lives. More than ever, we find ourselves crossing boundaries. This requires negotiation, with family members and with colleagues. We have to be more flexible. The sound of work meetings or group study activities can fill our home space. We have to be sensitive, mutually respectful, and flexible. Conversations with line managers, peers, and families about arrangements today need to be honest. There are many benefits that come from new ways of working but, whatever we are doing, we need to be realistic if we are to avoid wearing ourselves out or unnecessarily annoying others.

Questions

1. What strategies do you have for punctuating your day so that you take a mental break and have a physical stretch every hour or so? How does this compare to what other people do?
2. How do you successfully close down your work or study day to ensure you maintain space for home and life interests and responsibilities?
3. How do you help others to punctuate and manage their days in a supportive way?

Efficiency can come at a cost

JK reflects on meetings online.

“I always like to know what's expected of me. I didn't have, for example, an agenda for that meeting and I didn't really know what they were going to ask me or why they were asking me. I think that interaction I may well have been able to provide richer contributions had I had more time to think about what they were trying to achieve from that interview.”

Online meetings have many benefits in terms of access and productivity but can feel disembodied. It is easy to overlook engagement and establishing activities.

The quote above refers to an online meeting JK attended at quite short notice to support a research activity being conducted by research students from a Danish university. As an innovative academic, JK was intrigued by the opportunity to hear about the research they were conducting into playful learning. Preparing for – and reflecting on – a research topic creates an opportunity to consider your own interest and experience of it.

This meeting was inspiring, with images shared on the screen generated by artificial intelligence depicting non-traditional teaching spaces. As a result of being part of the

research, JK says she has started to think more about how she can embed playful learning into the classroom setting.

“That was a really good experience for me and obviously means, because of Zoom, I was able to participate. Either a clearer agenda or a series of questions to consider in advance of that meeting [would have helped] because it was such a tight meeting. I feel that I might have been able to provide them with, say, richer answers or contributions, because I thought of lots of things since. I could have also mentioned ‘this’ and could have mentioned ‘that’.”

Reflection

We have quickly adopted online spaces and tools and discovered them to be accessible and efficient. Providing access to an international research project, for example, potentially offers benefits for all involved. JK’s story highlights how the researchers may have overlooked some benefits by only engaging her at short notice. It left her with no time to prepare her thinking.

Questions:

1. If using online meetings, consider how people will prepare for those meetings. Is the meeting purpose clear? Are supporting materials provided?
2. If running an online event, have you created an appropriate activity, space or strategy to welcome participants where they can see who else is involved to help them settle into the event?
3. If you are taking part in online activities, have you thought about the time and space you will need to reflect on the activity? Perhaps producing a checklist for later of what you want to find out will help you to get more from the experience.

Developing the fluency habit – digital agility and age

BL describes how the role of digital technologies has developed throughout her career in academia. Originally from the US, in recent years technology has helped her to close the geographical gap between herself and her family. This has become increasingly important as her parents have become more dependent upon her.

Technology appears to be integral to almost everything BL does. She says,

“I can’t imagine a day of work where I’m not collaborating digitally, and hopefully sometimes physically, with colleagues.”

She describes how, since her father died last year, her mother is living alone in a large house for the first time in her life.

“So we had an alarm system put in. I have an app for it. I guess I’m the main kind of observer to make sure things are OK. [Without it], I would be much more worried about her than I am. It mitigates against some of the anxiety and worry that I have.”

BL says she feels comfortable with technology and in control of it most of the time. She notes how technological development has continued in parallel to her career in higher education and how being confident with technology, and maintaining that confidence is something that she has thought about a lot recently as she has started to think about retirement.

“One of my biggest fears is losing my confidence and knowledge around technology.”

In the work she leads in the university on inclusion and she sees technology as “a real blocker for a lot of people.” This is something she takes a lead on outside of her university role too. She tries to support people of different ages to be confident in using technology because she knows it can enable a sense of community when needed.

Reflections

BLs story explains why digital fluency, rather than just digital skills, is a useful discourse for educators. Fluency helps us to focus on a person’s agency over their experience and, in the postdigital world, being up-to-speed with and seeing the digital space critically and creatively should be life-empowering. University allows people to start developing good postdigital habits.

Questions

1. Creative and critical thinking is often expressed in terms of employability. How can educators reposition criticality and digital fluency as a life-enhancing habit?
2. Think about retired people you know. How well are they exploiting digital media?

Note on methodology

The vignettes in this booklet were produced from interviews conducted with students and staff at Anglia Ruskin University in 2024 for the QAA funded Harnessing Multimodalities in Digital Education project.

The interviews used PhotoVoice and Day in the Life methodologies. This supported a semi-structured conversational approach to be taken by drawing upon photographs and 'day log' diaries shared by respondents prior to the interview. Stories and quotes come from interview transcripts produced by MS Teams, through which all interviews were conducted.