

100 The Complex Impact of Space on Academic Identity and Sense of Community

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Even before the pandemic, space within universities was changing, evolving to respond to different ways of teaching, learning, and working within the university sector. Post-pandemic, this change is more visible as many staff and students have become more competent users of different forms of technology enabling academics and students to work remotely more comfortably. Even though research is one of the primary functions of universities, when reconfiguring university spaces the students' learning experience is often placed at the forefront, neglecting the needs of academics. This paper acts as a discussion piece, exploring difficult questions about what it means to work in the university post-pandemic, and how this new way of working will impact the development of academic identities and communities, by drawing on my experience of significant, on-going renovations to the physical space of my university.

Full paper

Even before the pandemic, space within universities was changing, evolving to respond to different ways of teaching, learning, and working within the university sector. Post-pandemic, this change is more visible as many staff and students have become more competent users of different forms of technology enabling academics and students to work remotely more comfortably. The functionality of the traditional tiered lecture theatre has been under question for years, as we move toward a more interactive and student-centred approach to teaching and learning, but now that many have moved to a flipped classroom approach, certain teaching spaces are being seen as unnecessary (Boys, 2015). Many discussions around the physical space of the university focus on the impact this has on teaching and learning (van Merriënboer et al., 2017). Even though research is one of the primary functions of universities, when reconfiguring university spaces the students' learning experience is often placed at the forefront, neglecting the needs of academics. This paper aims to explore the impact changes to the material space of the university have on academics working in these spaces, to their way of working and to their identity as academics.

My interest in this area comes as a result of ongoing and costly renovations to the Grade II listed building that I work in. These changes were presented as a much-needed update to a crumbling estate – toilet facilities that were no longer functional, and classrooms and offices that needed an update. However, the scale of the project, and who has been consulted in the planning has thrown into question the purpose of the university building and what it represents for those who work and study inside it. As part of the renovations, staff are being temporarily re-housed, shifted from floor to floor as works continue around the building, with some moved to different buildings entirely. Staff are being asked to pack up their belongings, books they have accumulated over years of working in academia, encouraged to 'have a clear out' before moving into their new spaces. The general sentiment among staff is that the architects don't understand what academics need from their spaces – the words 'open-plan' are whispered along the corridors, and staff are yet to know what the new space will look like or how they will fit within it.

After the pandemic, many colleagues were ready and looking forward to returning to campus to strengthen and in some cases rebuild connections with colleagues, but loud and disruptive building works meant that many have stayed home (if they have a quiet place to work), isolating themselves from their colleagues and students. Smith et al. (2022) found that while staff adapted to the hybrid working model or working from home, they often had a disrupted sense of identity due to these changes. Much of academic work is solitary – reading, writing, data analysis. And therefore, we may forget what we get from having a social infrastructure to our working lives – the spontaneous coffees had with colleagues in the café, or the brief chat in the lift that might spark a new idea. In their research on the impact of Covid-19 on academic identity, Smith et al. (2022) found that changes to teaching and working during the pandemic impacted on academic's confidence and sense of identity due to the quick changes they were required to make in

relation to their use of technology and online pedagogies. What do we lose when the space we work in no longer works for us or is not designed with our needs in mind? How does this mismatch impact on our development as academics, on our identity as academics in the current context?

This paper acts as a discussion piece, exploring difficult questions about what it means to work in the university post-pandemic, and how this new way of working will impact the development of academic identities and communities.

References

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