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Reimagining Universities for Sustainable and Inclusive Futures: Designing Hybrid Learning Spaces as Sites for Conviviality and Collaboration

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Research Domains

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract

This theoretical contribution explores hybrid, collaborative learning spaces in higher education (HE) and their role in advancing sustainable, future-oriented university mission. Framed by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it considers universities both as targets and agents of sustainability—through digital transformation and hybridisation, promoting equitable access and socio-economic mobility as well as through value-based education, preparing students to collaboratively navigate complex global challenges. In this work, 'hybrid' space is conceptualised as a dynamic human–non-human assemblage in which students curate their learning across physical and digital boundaries, with teachers playing a nurturing role. Rather than viewing hybridity as a purely technological shift, this paper argues that such spaces—when designed for conviviality and collaboration—can re-centre HE around values of common good, connection, and belonging. In the presentation, implications for teaching and learning are also discussed, with particular attention to fostering belonging and collective agency in uncertain times.

Full paper

Introduction

In response to evolving educational demands, traditional models of teaching and learning in higher education (HE) are undergoing transformation as part of a broader, future-oriented sustainability mission (Markauskaite et al., 2023). Within this context, sustainability manifests in two ways. First, higher education institutions (HEIs) are themselves subjects of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for instance, through digital transformation and hybridisation of education, that can enhance equitable access and promote socio-economic mobility (Trevisan et al., 2024). Second, HEIs can serve as drivers of SDGs, through value-driven curricula to foster capabilities that can empower students to

confront complex global challenges and engage in collective responses to emerging crises (Goodyear, 2022). Realising these ambitions, however, requires a robust theoretical and empirical understanding of the hybrid and value-oriented HE teaching and learning, along with the socio-material spaces in which they take place (Pöysä-Tarhonen, 2025).

Aim and theoretical argument

While hybrid educational models have gained prominence—particularly in light of sustainability and digital transformation—the conceptual foundations of hybridity in HE remain under-theorised (Nørgård, 2021). In response, this paper offers a theoretical synthesis that moves beyond narrow technological or pedagogical framings of hybridity (Pöysä-Tarhonen, 2025). Drawing on sociomaterialities (e.g., Gourlay, 2021) and new mobilities (e.g., Bayne et al., 2014), in this paper, 'hybrid' refers to 'fluid' (e.g., Eyal & Gil, 2022), as an experience of space where the boundaries of formal dichotomies, such as 'digital–physical', 'artificial–natural', and 'human–non-human', are blurred. From this perspective, learning spaces are understood as complex and dynamic assemblages composed of interrelated elements, including students, teachers, digital and physical environments, policies, and curricula. This conceptualisation also shifts the focus to the student: it is the student's choice that transcends these boundaries, rather than being externally dictated (Eyal & Gil, 2022). Within this context, the roles and capabilities of the teacher as 'distributed' (Dron, 2022) are also in transition (Markauskaite et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the paper examines how hybrid, collaborative learning spaces can equip students with the capabilities needed to collaboratively address complex global challenges. This perspective highlights the need for curricula that support the development of knowledge, attitudes, and values oriented towards the common good. Students' capabilities are thus seen more broadly than person-centred skills and competences; they are value-driven and future-oriented, which makes them pertinent to sustainability discussions (e.g., Markauskaite et al., 2023). In educational terms, this shift entails fostering outcomes that not only benefit individual students but also prepare them to contribute to the well-being of others, encouraging for convivial and collaborative engagement (Goodyear, 2022).

Conclusions

The mandate of universities is evolving, with a growing emphasis on sustainability and preparing students for uncertain futures. While physical campus presence will likely remain central for most HEIs, the successful implementation of hybrid learning spaces has become increasingly important (De Caro-Barek & Støckert, 2024). Although hybrid, collaborative learning spaces offer significant potential for enhancing and democratising higher education (Mor et al., 2022), their full promise remains in their infancy and demands continued scholarly and practical exploration. As Lamb and Carvalho (2024) observe, although learning spaces are anchored in material settings—even in remote contexts (Gourlay, 2021)—the quality of the learning experience cannot be determined by physicality

or materiality alone. Rather, the factors that make a place conducive to learning (or contrarywise) also emerge through sentiments and relationships (e.g., Lamb & Carvalho, 2024). This presentation will examine the concept of hybrid, collaborative learning spaces in HE teaching and learning in greater depth, with particular attention to fostering belonging and collective agency in uncertain times.