

What University Classroom Signs Might Tell Us About Contemporary Pedagogic Values

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

University classrooms contain signs instructing teachers and learners: “don't eat”, “don't open windows” and “record the session”. We argue that these signs are not merely functional, but powerful artefacts or ‘topologies of (inter)connection, social meaning, and practice’ (Elkington and Dickinson, 2025: 10) that reveal contemporary pedagogical values. This research uses mapping and photo documentation (Füllung, Hering, and Kulke, 2024) of signage present in central teaching spaces of a UK and a Swedish university. Emerging data demonstrate how the visual and textual meanings present or absent from university signage construct learning spaces as impersonal landscapes where technology dominates, and human bodies are perceived as potential disruptions. We suggest this represents and reproduces an educational model prioritising standardisation and technological mediation over human comfort and pedagogic innovation. Our research provokes researchers to imagine how signs could be re-created to reflect a more expansive future for students, teachers and campus learning landscapes.

Full paper

This research is provoked by a shared archaeological curiosity with what we might know about a university classroom from its material remnants, if we visited from a far-off time or place. Research on learning landscapes invites us to explore how learners, teachers and spaces are entangled, and how spaces orient and construct knowledge and pedagogies (Elkington and Dickinson, 2025). Signs, as everyday (and often unnoticed) artefacts within such spaces, similarly have agentic possibilities to influence relationships, pedagogies and practice. For example, research on signage in libraries (e.g. Luca and Narayan, 2016) attests to their role as powerful forms of communication and support for users of these spaces but also as revealing institutional values such as playfulness or seriousness. Austin and Hickey (2008) surveyed signs in Australian schools, also revealing their multiple purposes - from wayfinding to celebrating the achievements of the students or the institution. The

authors use Henry Giroux's (2004) concept of public pedagogy to show how signage creates, embeds and promotes a particular school identity, having both an everyday function, as well as a symbolic meaning. Our research fills a gap in studies on university classroom signage, exploring how signs both convey and reflect meanings tied to learning spaces and broader values, practices, and pedagogies.

Consequently, we sought to answer the following questions:

1. What signs are present in English and Swedish university classrooms?
2. What messages do these signs communicate about contemporary pedagogical values?
3. What are the possibilities for signs to be pedagogically orientated?

The research contexts are two universities in the UK and Sweden. The UK site is a campus university on the outskirts of a city in the Southeast of England, consisting of 52 main buildings and facilities. There are 141 rooms known as 'general teaching space', including Lecture Theatres, Seminar Rooms or Specialist Labs, which are allocated to teaching across programmes. These are owned and managed by the university. The Swedish site is in a city centre in the West of Sweden, consisting of four buildings and areas, with approximately 45 rooms allocated for teaching, including Lecture Theatres, Active Learning Classrooms and Specialist Labs. These rooms are owned either by the Swedish state or by private enterprise. Commonalities between the contexts include the general categories and functions of the teaching spaces.

Our methodology involved visiting all teaching spaces, mapping and categorising the location and visual/textual content of signs present as: instructional, behavioural, security and safety, environmental, pedagogical, accessibility and academic (Füllung, Hering, and Kulke, 2024). Photos were taken of all signs inside or closely adjacent to the classroom. This produced descriptive quantitative data of the type, regularity and location of signs. We subjected the photos to critical visual semiotic analysis (Barthes and Heath, 1977), taking into account both the descriptive meaning and the messages and values it signifies.

Our initial findings indicate the dominance of instructional and behavioural signs that position food/mess/outdoors and bodies as things to be carefully managed within the sacred spaces of the classroom and protected from students' and staff behaviours. The location of signs predominantly around the lectern/computer reinforces the sage on the stage positioning of the teacher and the dominance of technological signs spatially orients technologies with learning. Finally, there was a general lack of signs and ones that were present were standardised, revealing limited information about university learning. The signs suggest that teaching spaces must be multi-purpose, impersonal and entirely neutral. If signs create, embed and promote a particular identity of a place, the signs we saw reflect an educational model prioritising standardisation, and technological mediation over human comfort and pedagogical innovation. We also turned our attention to what signs were absent. There was limited signage about how to use the room – i.e. how to set up the space or furniture for specific pedagogical purposes. Indeed, there was an absence of signs

indicating what kinds of learning took place or the presence of students or teachers at all. In short, the signs were rarely personal, pedagogical or university-oriented. Signage was not a background artefact in our research but, aligned with research on learning spaces, contextual, interactive and shaped by the presence of others (Lamb, Carvalho and Gallegher, 2022).

Our research indicates that university classroom signage across both the UK and Sweden reflects and creates learning landscapes that are entirely impersonal, tech-dominated and mostly inflexible. Our ongoing research will seek to explore how paying attention to signage could be a small part of imagining the future university differently as a space of and for learning.