

Creating spaces for collegiality, collaboration and community in the university

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Expectations of academic staff in UK universities are demanding – teaching, research, supervision – as well as institutional citizenship and contributions to the academic community. Despite this, spaces within the university to fulfil these roles are shrinking and being transformed into open-plan offices or student study spaces that are not fit for purpose. Because of the pandemic, staff have adapted to hybrid ways of working by relying on technology to perform their roles in diverse settings (Deshmukah, 2020). However, much is lost for both staff and students when we abandon physical spaces on campus. Transformations to the architecture of the university are shaping how staff work, requiring staff to adapt their practices within institutional constraints. This paper discusses ongoing, multi-phased research, using actor-network theory to explore the assemblage of actors, both human and non-human, that impact academic practices in the university, through autoethnographic data and interviews with other academics.

Full paper

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the assemblage of actors, both human and non-human, that impact academic practices in the university, through autoethnographic data and interviews with other academics.

This project was inspired by recent changes to the design of our building. The move toward more open-plan and shared office spaces seems to have ignored the needs of academics who often need quiet or private spaces to accommodate the various roles they take on within the university (Kiliç-çalgici & Czerkauer-Yamu, 2012). While increased technology use has led to more flexibility and convenience, it has also created situations where staff can work from anywhere, often preferring to work outside the university campus especially if their space is not functional. However, when we don't come to work together in the same space, our sense of community is greatly impacted (Cox et al., 2012), as are our identities as academics (Smith et al., 2022), and the opportunity for collegiality and collaboration. Collegiality refers to companionship and cooperation between colleagues who often share responsibility (Tight, 2014), which overlaps with both collaboration and community.

Being together in a space helps promote a sense of belonging to a community, which is especially important in academic work and research (Smith et al., 2022). Informal and spontaneous interaction, in the canteen, lobby, or hallway, can lead to collaboration or the sparking of new ideas (Newport, 2016). But more than sparking creativity, being together is important for promoting collegiality and sense of community in the workplace (Kiliç-çalgici & Czerkauer-Yamu, 2012). In the current context characterised by competition, comparison, and precarity in the academy, it can be challenging to find a supportive environment that brings value and motivation to our work as academics (Caddell & Wilder, 2018).

Since the pandemic, informal and formal spaces that promote community have faltered – fewer people are joining events or meetings in-person, and fewer members of staff are in the building at any given time. Spaces that were dedicated to informal or spontaneous interactions have been removed – transformed into formal teaching spaces or computer labs. These changes to the material space that we work in are shaping and impacting the communities that once inhabited these spaces. Technology was a great help during the pandemic as it allowed us to continue our work when we couldn't be in the same space, but adapting back to working on campus has not been a simple case of returning to the old normal. Our 'new normal' is one that is characterised by Teams meetings and by increased use of emails rather than communicating in person, creating an environment where colleagues feel disconnected rather than part of a community.

This research explores emergent themes and tensions around technology, space, community, and academic identity. Actor-network theory will be used to engage with the complex assemblage of both the material space and human and non-human actors within the academic context in the 'new normal'. By 'shadowing' myself as I move within the space of our building to fulfil different aspects of my role, how I use the space and how the space impacts my practice can be explored (Vasquez, Brummans & Groleau, 2012). A better understanding of how academics use, build community in, and are shaped by our physical

environment can provide insights into what it means to be an academic in the post-Covid, hybrid working context. It is hoped that the outcomes of this research will also help to create more spaces for us to work together as colleagues, helping to promote a sense of community and collegiality that has been deteriorating since the start of the pandemic.