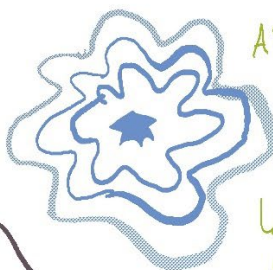# Landscapes of learning for unknown futures: presenter responses to audience questions

With thanks to Dr. Jill Dickinson, Associate Professor in Law at the University of Leeds for pulling together these responses, and to John Miers at https://johnmiers.com/ for the accompanying sketches.
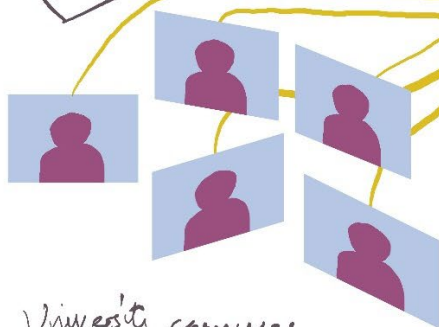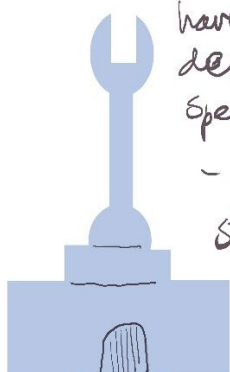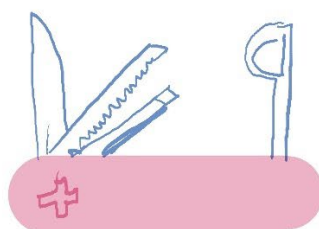
Flexibilities

1. During our symposium, several presentations addressed the issue of space and place being treated as an afterthought or backdrop, rather than as 'enacted, turbulent, entangled and hybrid' (Edwards et al 2011). How can we centre the complexity of space as a part of our pedagogy, and how can this benefit teaching and learning practice, and experience?

Dr Jeremy Knox: One way of doing this is to embrace hybrid – digital, online, and face-to-face – spaces, as well as, crucially, foregrounding reflection on the use of technology. So often we are taught to assume that the best technologies are those that we don't notice; 'good' technologies are 'intuitive', in such a way as they sink down into our everyday lives. The use of technology in education should encourage us to do the opposite, particularly where we are thinking about space. Rather than assuming that good educational technologies are there to simply 'enhance' our teaching or learning, and are therefore 'invisible' in the process, we might make our techno-spatial arrangements more of a direct focus of educational activity. This might be as simple as beginning video calls with a group discussion of what kind of experience the technology affords, and perhaps a collective establishing of etiquette.

Dr Andrew Middleton: I deal with this complexity in my role as an educational developer by advocating for active learning and explaining how being student-centred is how we go about understanding this. In brief, this involves discussing the value of, and signalling expectation for, student agency in their formal and non-formal (self-directed and determined) learning. I will often frame such discussions using my DB3C framework – 'Doing' focusing on learning as an outcome of activity; 'Being' as developing situations in which the learner is encouraged to own, enact and embody their subject and its problems; 'Belonging' as recognising an educational experience that is essentially co-operative in ethos and nature; 'Becoming' as addressing the need for developing intrinsic motivation in any learning situation; and 'Connecting' encapsulating knowledge as being an outcome of a continual habit of seeking associations between people, what is known, and a desire to explore together what is not yet known.

Dr Kevin Merry: From a UDL perspective, the learning space is an instructional tool, not just a space to teach in. As such, there has to be clear intentionality in how the space will be used to support learners to achieve the learning goals. For example, what role will the space play in the learning and teaching approaches to be used? Is it well matched to the type of activities that will be required by learners to meet the learning goals? How can the space support multiple representations in how learners perceive and comprehend information associated with their learning? Is it possible to display posters, glossaries, prompts etc? Is there a space where learners can go to quietly watch a video, listen to a podcast or use the internet? Finally, what role does the space play in relation to how learning is evaluated (have learners achieved the goals?)? What will be possible given the constraints of the environment?

Dr Namrata Rao and Dr Patrick Baughan: We would argue that whilst space is an important aspect of the learning and teaching process, it is important that it is considered in relation to the pedagogical context to avoid it from driving and reshaping the learning and teaching

practice instead of enhancing it in a real sense. In some pedagogical contexts, space and place may be central and in others it is likely to be of less significance. Therefore, it is important that it is considered in conjunction with other aspects of learning and teaching practice.

2. Several of the presenters spoke to the value of using worldbuilding tools and found resources in their teaching practices, particularly as a means of fostering spontaneity and co-creation. How do these methodologies shape our understanding of the role of space in teaching and learning, in your opinion/experience?

Dr Jeremy Knox: I have encouraged the creative use of 'found' content online particularly in courses about studying the internet. This is because a substantial dimension of the history of the internet has involved an ideology of 'openness' and the abundance of information. It is important to teach this history because online technologies are now heavily commercialised, and so-called 'big tech' companies have become immensely powerful political actors as a result of their commercialisation of digital space. Encouraging students to engage with 'found' objects is way of resisting the monetisation of digital space that we've seen in MOOCs, for example. Rather than paying to watch 'elite' university lectures through MOOC platforms, we might encourage students to reflect on what they want to learn, explore and gather 'found' resources themselves that they might find useful, and discuss, evaluate and interpret them collectively. That sounds to me like a more productive way to learn, and a way engaging way of thinking about the space of teaching.

Dr Andrew Middleton:

Educational space is invisible to many academics and students. It is accepted as being neutral and often understood as being a standard container that is provided for us. The affordances of the material, digital, social and psychological spaces we use often go unnoticed unless something goes wrong. I spoke about polycontextual affordances and the need for spatial fluency – how being able to confidently navigate and negotiate the spaces we use will enhance our experiences of teaching and learning. Spatial fluency is also an important graduate outcome in a postdigital world, and being practiced at getting the best from different situations by seeing space and place as nuanced, influential, ripe for modification and reinvention, needs to be better appreciated.
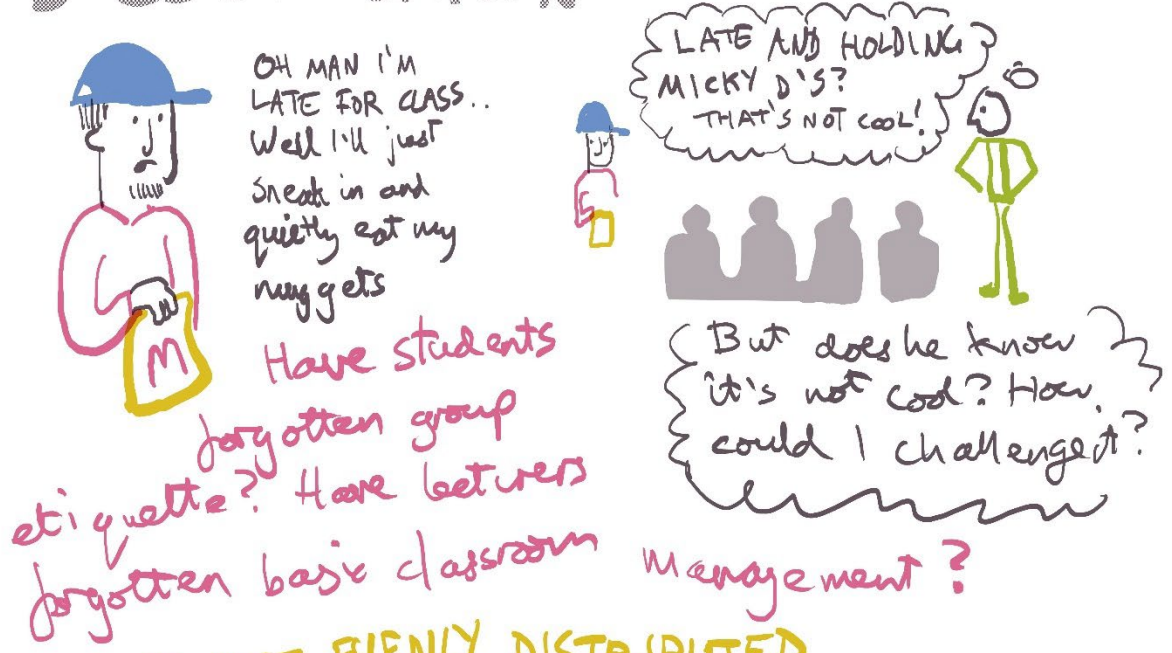
Our spaces and the situations we create in them need to be better understood by our universities, teachers and students. Acts of polycontextual boundary crossing are commonplace but tend to go unnoticed. How a teacher or a student maintains their multiple identities as scholar, carer and worker, for example, goes largely is ignored or perceived as life problems that have to be managed. Instead, such acts of continuous boundary crossing indicate how we are adept at navigating and negotiating our lifewide spaces and signal what could be achieved in the way we design our courses and spaces. For example, scenario and problem-based pedagogies that invite our learners to delve deeper will help to develop their spatial fluency and self-efficacy. Knowing that we can manage life and work effectively and healthily is, post-pandemic, something we all understand more than we did three years ago. Universities need to embrace this talent we have demonstrated.
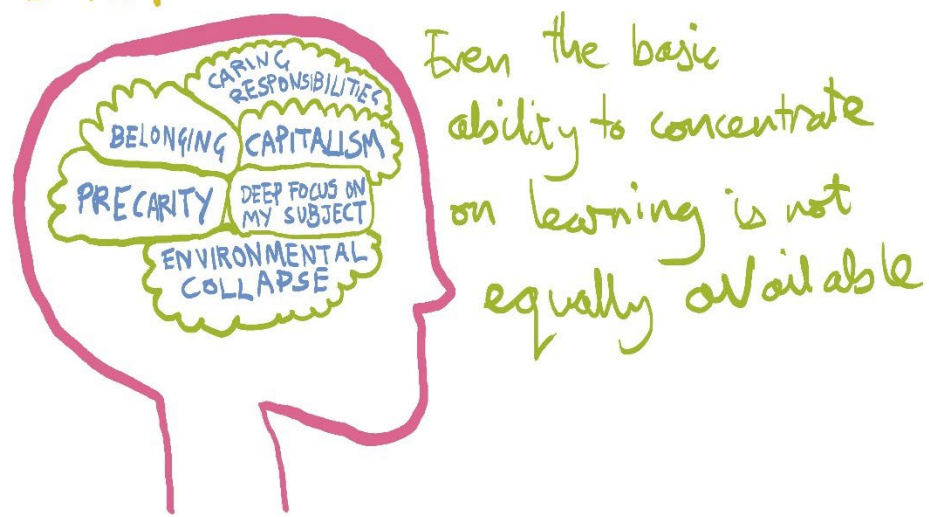
LANDSCAPES OF LEARNING FOR UNKNOWN FUTURES

≡ PANEL DISCUSSION ≡

DESOCIALISATION

SYMPOSIUM 2: Flexibilities

POST-PANDEMIC

OH MAN I'M LATE FOR CLASS.. Well I'll just sneak in and quietly eat my nuggets

LATE AND HOLDING MICKY D'S? THAT'S NOT COOL!

Have students forgotten group etiquette? Have lecturers forgotten basic classroom management?

But does he know it's not cool? How could I challenge it?

HE IS NOT EVENLY DISTRIBUTED

CARING RESPONSIBILITIES
BELONGING
CAPITALISM
PRECARITY
DEEP FOCUS ON MY SUBJECT
ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE

Even the basic ability to concentrate on learning is not equally available

Dr Kevin Merry: If we desire spontaneity and co-creation, then we have to design for it, in terms of what we do as teachers, our resources etc., but more importantly what we get the learners to do. Learning space considerations are central to this design approach. For example, do the spaces provide clear opportunities to optimise spontaneity and co-creation when combined with our approaches and resources? Sure, we can attempt these things in

spaces not necessarily designed for the purpose, but that's like saying to Lewis Hamilton, "we've got a Ford Focus for you to drive in the Grand Prix today". The Focus will get him round the track, but not in optimal fashion. Hence, we must think about what is optimal as far as co-creation etc., are concerned. I was in a lecture theatre in Aberdeen recently. The seating had been broken up into booths that could accommodate 3-4 learners. Each booth had a larger desk area than regular lecture theatres, so they could easily accommodate, say, a piece of flipchart paper. The booths also had microphones and charging points too. The space, despite being a place where predominantly didactic teaching takes place had been designed to enable greater collaboration, creativity, enquiry etc. Although there were still some limitations, it's pleasing to see such examples of spaces being thought out more carefully.

Dr Namrata Rao & Dr Patrick Baughan: This is not something we contributed to in our symposium presentation, but we would be interested in looking at other people's view on this.

3. Throughout the day, there was a keen emphasis on affective and ambient elements of learning spaces as key to fostering connectivity, as well as the value of informal interactions. How can we articulate the impact of these affective qualities of learning spaces – particularly in a higher education system which favours quantitative measurements around the usage of learning spaces?

Dr Jeremy Knox: The 'emergency' remote teaching and learning precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, in many cases, the narrow, constrained, and reductive architecture of online education platforms, and the often-shallow educational experiences that resulted from their enforced use. Boxed-in to Zoom calls, or set adrift in sparsely populated discussion fora, these spaces sometimes seemed, rather than simply replicating the classroom, to place into stark contrast everything that was lost. The fact that a cat jumping into view during a Zoom call consistently caused such delight amongst the group (at least in my experience!) seems testament to our craving for the informal within online spaces (technologies *and* teaching) designed purely for the task at hand.

One way of resisting an overemphasis on quantitative measurements could be to think about the temporal as well as the spatial. Educational technologies are habitually promoted on the promise of efficiency-savings in learning and teaching; education, so the narrative tends to go, would be so much better if students could just get through the experience quicker. But what if we were to design technologies that could acknowledge and accommodate more in the way of informal and ambient space-times? I might go further and suggest that we could challenge the distinction between 'formal' and 'informal', which always assumes that latter to be less important.

Dr Andrew Middleton: One answer to this massive question is to focus on something we must have learnt during the pandemic – more than anything in education, we value being together. We remain tenacious, as curriculum developers to use content as our crutch, thereby maintaining a discourse of delivery. It is not surprising we so easily fall back to that conception of the course experience, but we should remember how isolated we were and how alienated we became in the pandemic. Teaching and learning amongst peers and

enjoying acts of learning through co-creation and co-production should be the starting point for any curriculum design. When we are together, we should have space to act together.

Dr Kevin Merry: Excellent question! Learners are variable in a myriad of ways. One often overlooked and misunderstood element of viability is emotional variability – the different ways learners will feel about learning, and the subsequent emotional states that arise. Central to this idea is that the learning environments we create, including learning spaces will impact upon how a learner will feel. The nature of those feelings will likely have a bearing on how successful we are with our learning. For example, whenever I see individual desks laid out in rows from front to back, it reminds me of exams (nervous) or maths class (humiliation). Either way, I don't feel totally comfortable in such spaces, as I perceive them in a threatening way. The exam hall is where my dreams could be crushed. Maths class is where I'm called to the board to solve an equation, which I can't do! Hence, the space impacts upon my emotions, mood, motivation and subsequent readiness for learning. If those emotions are negative, lowering my mood and motivation, then several barriers have been erected preventing me from learning optimally. As such, it is important for learning spaces to be welcoming, safe, collaborative spaces, free from judgement, where we're not expected to go it alone, and where mistakes are encouraged as part of the learning process.

Dr Namrata Rao and Dr Patrick Baughan: Informal conversations and flexible use of spaces offer an alternative discourse to the quantitative measures permeating the higher education spaces. We need to raise the profile of the use of affective dimension of learning spaces by:

a) Creating greater awareness via dissemination of outcomes of such studies via conferences, publications, web blogs etc.
b) Collaboration - with students by attempting to bring them into this work and viewpoint; and with other stakeholders such as estates, student wellbeing units so that there is a shared, broader understanding of the value offered by this alternative discourse.
c) Impact - create case studies and reports on the value the affective use of spaces might offer for well being and health of higher education.

4. To what extent have the presenters observed different engagement practices by students this year and how have these impacted on their specific areas of research and ways of working within learning 'spaces'?

Dr Andrew Middleton: Our students are as diverse as the rest of us. I do not think it is helpful to generalise. I would say that I have observed that we are all still coming to terms with what happened during the pandemic. Even though we are trying to recreate a normality, the reality is that there is a high degree of anxiety. Campuses retain their ghost town feel to some extent. When we do find ourselves together, however, I sense we forget ourselves and find great joy in being social.

At ARU, our interest in formal and non-formal spaces for learning has been energised. We have used our recent experiences of isolation and alienation to bolster our active pursuance of active, inclusive and collaborative learning. Techniques learnt at a distance like co-writing through chat channels and shared documents help us to be inventive now in the classroom.

For example, we have been developing 'whiteboarding' pedagogies where we stand shoulder-to-shoulder drawing and writing as we think through ideas and problems together.

Dr Kevin Merry: Since emerging from the pandemic and returning to physical learning spaces for in-person teaching, two key issues have struck me. The first is just how inadequate most physical spaces are to support learners to meet the goals of learning, i.e. the learning space as an instructional tool idea discussed earlier. For example, I've observed many teaching sessions that have had learning goals that in the broadest sense have required active, collaborative learning approaches, but then the session itself is scheduled in a tiered lecture theatre that possesses very little flexibility in terms of changes to layout, repurposing of furniture, creating "stations" for different types of activities etc. Hence, there is a complete misalignment between the purpose of the session and where it takes place. I guess what I'm trying to say is that there appears to be a clear lack of intentionality around learning space design. Gallaudet University in Washington DC, is a school for hearing impaired learners. It has deliberately horse shoe shaped learning spaces, so that all learners can see each other signing. There are no sharp corners anywhere, only softly curved corners, since if learners are walking the halls and signing to each other, there's less chance of injury. There are huge windows letting in streams of natural light so the learners have no problem seeing each other sign. It is perhaps the best example of intentional space design I have seen.
The second key issue is that we can no longer expect anyone to "be there" in-person all of the time, and have to accept that for many, accessing learning synchronously or even asynchronously in a virtual learning space reduces or removes barriers for them. As an educational developer, staff uptake of online workshops now far exceeds workshops that happen in-person, because online is more convenient. Moe convenient means a barrier somewhere has been removed. Hence, my view is that the future, if we are genuinely interested in accessible, inclusive and equitable education, has to be hyflex.
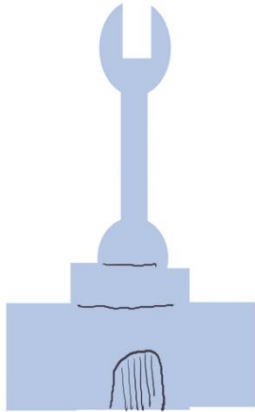
Dr Namrata Rao and Dr Patrick Baughan: This is not something we contributed to in our symposium presentation but we would be interested in looking at other people's view on this. Our presentation focussed more on the tutors and the value they saw in the everyday conversations in the informal spaces such as the office corridors and how this had an impact on their learning and teaching professional development. However, we do believe the significance of such spaces for their professional wellbeing in turn would offer value to the learning experience of the students they teach.

5. What do the presenters think the immediate priorities are for learning space design and utilisation in higher education and what/where is the actionable knowledge we can build on, and how?
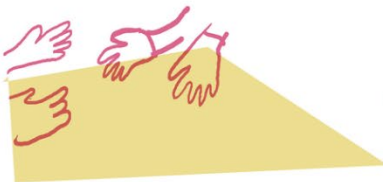
LANDSCAPES OF LEARNING FOR UNKNOWN FUTURES
≡ PANEL DISCUSSION ≡
SYMPOSIUM 2: Flexibilities

WHAT DOES A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SIGNIFY?

EMPLOYABILITY?

SOCIALISATION?

META COGNITION?

CARING RESPONSIBILITIES
BELONGING
CAPITALISM
PRECARITY
DEEP FOCUS ON MY SUBJECT
ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE

It depends on WHO is answering and WHEN

Dr Jeremy Knox: I think there is a need to theorise and develop 'hybrid' more clearly. I often hear that these kinds of arrangements haven't worked to people's expectations. For example, we have the technology to stream live seminars, but a meaningful connection between the people 'in the room' and those online often hasn't materialised. I don't think

this is simply a question of technical design. I think we need to go back to theorising 'hybrid', and asking questions about how we work *within* the complexities of 'enacted, turbulent, entangled and hybrid' space, rather than try to 'accommodate' the face-to-face and the online as two distinct audiences, for example.

Dr Andrew Middleton: The immediate priorities are to engage widely with colleagues to ensure we put *place* before *space*. Universities remain monolithic organisations that do not adequately reflect our diversity in their structures and systems – we are so used to seeing technologies such as rooms as functional tools for getting bums on seats lined up in rows – 'delivery' thinking. The immediate priority is to look at space as it is actually experienced and valued. Instead, we need to focus on how we can incorporate more metaphorical ledges, edges, perches and desire paths and ways that really accommodate student-centred learning. If we don't treat this as a priority, I fear universities will continue to contain our potential rather than release it.

Dr Kevin Merry: We must start to design learning spaces that clearly support learners to meet the goals of learning in intentional ways. To support their mastery of content in intentional ways and also to develop their learning capabilities through the development of metacognition in intentional ways. For example, we know, since there are literally hundreds of articles, that learners don't learn all that effectively through lectures. Hence, we must stop building them, instead replacing them with spaces that encourage collaboration, creativity, enquiry, safety, and ultimately provide a realistic preview of the world beyond higher education. I've never learned to do any job sitting in a lecture theatre. It's a bit naff to say we need to replace old teaching spaces with "learning laboratories", places where learners experiment in hands on fashion, solving problems through trial and error, but I can't think of a better phrase. We have to reframe who the space is for and its intended purpose. Looking at old learning spaces such as lecture theatres, there is a clear designation of ownership. For example, the lectern is like an "X marks the spot" for who owns the space – the all-powerful academic who occupies the space according to their needs and their rules. I' encourage people to look into Gallaudet University, explore the work NTU have done with Scale-UP and of course take a look at the UDL guidelines. Hopefully their ideas about learning spaces will be transformed!

Dr Namrata Rao and Dr Patrick Baughan: We think that the following would be important:

a) Raising the profile of this work by more research (drawing international perspectives/research on the value of learning spaces)
b) Early engagement with the various stakeholders in the process of design of such spaces would enable collaborative responsibility and ownership of outcomes.
c) A clear demonstration of the impact/value of thoughtfully engaging with learning space design/use would be helpful.