Designed Co-spontaneity: A New Model for Facilitating Pedagogic Practice

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Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual model for a design thinking approach to achieving co-spontaneity in higher education contexts, particularly within 'meetings', (i.e., lectures, tutorials, and tutor-student feedback sessions). The model re-evaluates these meetings as an essential part of ideation and exploration—rather than as a barrier—in spaces where uncertainty can be embraced. Uncertainty is often seen as a factor to be reduced or avoided, especially in teaching, but is here viewed as essential to bringing about engaging staff-student experiences through strategically designed spontaneity for all participants. In support of this approach, the literature and reflection on practice are presented as challenges to complacency on the part of educators, championing instead the need to embrace uncertainty in design-led classrooms as desirable for both, teaching and teaching planning. The model thus proposes that spontaneity be 'co-collaborative' and not simply imposed upon students as yet another activity demanding compliance. Reflections from practice with this model are grouped around three themes: (i) barriers from academic culture, often on the part of staff; (ii) barriers from academic literacy, often on the part of students; and (iii) assumptions, applicable to all. By positioning these reflections alongside contexts drawn from literature around meetings, uncertainty, and risk in higher education, our four-zone model presents a continuum—from absolute control to absolute chaos. The model does not attempt to provide definitive answers to uncertainty, but instead offers a reflective tool to support, and even embrace, the benefits of uncertainty and spontaneity in teaching and planning for staff and students of design.

Keywords: Co-spontaneity; Uncertainty; Design Thinking, Meetings; Control; Higher Education

1. Overview

The call for this special issue asked if it was possible 'to move from a meeting-based culture to a designed, visual and actionable way of working'. In this paper, however, we seek to challenge this distinction by positioning an alternative understanding of the idea of 'meetings' as essential to, rather than a barrier against, designed and actionable working practices that embrace uncertainty and risk as key components of spontaneity. The model proposes four stages in which educators can increasingly sacrifice control in favour of greater possibilities for spontaneity, while still retaining overall leadership of the classroom and its stakeholders. This is in line with a move away from restricted conceptions of knowledge acquisition, to approaches focusing on the ontological, not just epistemological role of higher education. Dall'Alb and Barnacle (2007) raise the Heideggerian context of being, not just knowing—and here we position the essential nature of uncertainty as a key part of every-day being in the world; to remove it would be unsound.

1.1. Meetings in the context of higher education

As higher education becomes increasingly commercialised, tensions arise between traditional notions espousing purely teacher-led pedagogy, and more business-oriented models that prioritise discussions, debates, risk, and even disagreement. As Roberts (2022, p.8) puts it:

> While we want to innovate and be known for this or that creative program or initiative, we most decidedly do not want to be considered weird. Academic reputation matters a lot. This can lead to a risk-averse organisational culture and even, one could argue, a sector-wide aversion to risk.

The notion of 'spontaneity' is thus useful to explore this shift away from the tutor as the sole nexus of control. At once 'spontaneity' represents all that is uncertain, perhaps unreliable, and risky; at the same time the term encapsulates much of what design thinking strives to achieve. Meetings are pertinent spaces in which the effects of spontaneity can be observed, tested, and continually re-designed to maximise the advantages of uncertainty and risk, while affording tutors optimal controls over their classrooms and curricula.

Within the context of the paper, 'meetings' in a higher education context refers to meetings between staff and students (such as in a seminar or lecture), with a normative assumption of a group of students and a teacher, or similar figure, at least nominally 'in charge', typically within an established timetabled session. Note, however, that this is not intended as an all-encompassing definition by any means, but rather a basis from which to grow a model for discussion. For example, the concepts of control and uncertainty might also be usefully applied to meetings between faculty members, such as a module teaching team, gathering to explore new approaches to the application of design thinking within their teaching.

While this starting definition of the 'meeting' within higher education may seem overly traditional, it is not intended to discount approaches which include students as co-creators of their learning experiences through initiatives such as Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) and opportunities for students to 'partner in course design teams (CDT) that co-create, or re-create, a course syllabus' (Bovill, Cook-

Sather, and Felten, 2011, p.136)—thereby blurring the boundary between student and staff focused meetings.

1.2. Meetings for spontaneity, not frustration

The study, or science, of meetings has its own considerable literature. While the full extent of this literature is beyond the scope of such a reflective piece, representative articles such as Mroz et al. (2018) and Rogelberg, Scott, and Kello (2007) emphasise both the value and negatives of meetings as they can become 'a source of frustration rather than enlightenment' *(*Rogelberg, Scott, and Kello, 2007, p.18). Such research places the focus of meetings on efficiency, procedure, and agendas. Other studies of meetings emphasise the need for effective and transformative higher education, for instance Hammersley's (2016, p.56) use of language games in learning to challenge time efficient learning versus deep learning.

Handford (2010) highlights two sub-categories of meetings: transactional and relational. Key to these distinctions is the observation that while most casual speakers have a goal in mind, such goals are relational in nature—i.e., they are driven by interpersonal motivations—as opposed to business meetings where conversations are often, but not always, directed towards achieving transactional objectives (Handford, 2010, pp. 27–28). While a business's goals may be seen as financially motivated to "close the deal", our focus is not on the differences between boardrooms and classrooms, but on the deal-closing aspect. Closing the deal within an educational context can then mean having all participants contribute towards creating co-spontaneous conditions, be it through transactional exchanges or relational interactions.

Approached from this perspective, there is consensus around the meaning of meetings: at its core the term signifies an assembly of people around a common agenda. The commonality of the agenda does not necessarily imply agreement from all parties, though this may be a stated goal of the meeting. However, disagreements are not only characteristic of most meetings, but serve to underpin the term's intrinsic definition: meetings are neither disagreements nor agreements. While both aspects are encompassed in its broader operations, meetings primarily are mediated exchanges designed to fulfil desired outcomes, including scenarios where the desired outcome is to have no outcome, i.e., ideation or iterative discourse. Key to this discussion, however, is that every meeting culminates in an ending that is then assigned a certain value by the meeting's stakeholders. This value, or score, represents how closely a meeting's desired outcome matched stakeholder expectations. Given the ordered nature of exchanges designed into meetings, is there room for spontaneity? Can design and spontaneity co-exist within these ordered spaces?

As with the positioning of 'meeting' within this paper, 'designed spontaneity', presents a contradiction and requires consideration of the core value within each of the words. Teaching planning needs to be planned and considered, i.e., the *agenda* of any meeting, since this brings essential qualities of consistency, comprehensibility, and operationalisation (although this will be questioned later in section 3). However, in times of increasing anxiety and competition within higher education, especially within a United Kingdom context, such approaches have often led to obsessing over

prescriptiveness and exact repeatability; to delineate every detail in advance for extensive review. But while safe and familiar, such approaches are the opposite of spontaneity and its resultant creation of learning spaces that encourage risk and experimentation without the fear of failure. In other words, it is crucial that there exist the acceptance of uncertainty—not only as a natural state of knowledge and research, but also as an active factor in achieving spontaneity within design-led teaching environments. That 'teaching is evidently and inevitably uncertain,' Floden and Clark, (1988, p.505) foregrounds the extent to which uncertainty is essential in teaching, not just for the student of design but for the teacher as well.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the higher education sector had long recognised shifts in its global market, along with the pervasive uncertainties in the sector (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016). COVID-19 itself then led to substantial and existential uncertainties (not least financial, Burki 2020) for institutions, and a different range of uncertainties and skills gaps for students in the face of increased use of online classrooms (Neuwirth, Jović, and Mukherji, 2020). There are positive and negative aspects to this uncertainty as summarised in Helsing (2007). Nonetheless, it is equally important to reflect on the combined nature of the uncertainty: it exists both for teachers and for students in ways that cannot be fully uncoupled, and thus a necessary phenomenon through which to achieve spontaneity. Achieving the benefits of uncertainty and spontaneity therefore merits design thinking approaches that are embraced at student, academic practitioner, and administrative levels.

More importantly, this approach is not just directed at students, but necessitates risk-taking by teachers and the designers of teaching: students cannot be asked to embrace uncertainty without staff doing so as well. As design educators, we must have the courage to move beyond traditionally "safe" methods, which, ultimately, imprison impulse and reduce design thinking to rote learning and future irrelevance. Avoiding fixation on solution, and instead on aim, process, and action may reduce anxiety for both the teacher and the student since the focus is not on striving for the "right" outcome, but on understanding.

2. Reflections on barriers to spontaneity

In discussing the obstacles to spontaneity, we identify three categories observed in higher education: cultural barriers; literacy barriers; and assumptive barriers.

2.1. Academic culture barriers to spontaneity

Cultural dynamics in teaching present another significant cultural barrier in higher education classrooms, especially with regards to what might be termed "emotional defensiveness around teaching". As with many of the points raised in this paper, such defensiveness is not just sited in students, but also needs to be challenged throughout the culture of higher education in the in the face of change in teaching (see, e.g., Dall'Alba, 2005). Consequently, when creating cultures and contexts that support exploration and embracing uncertainty, the defensiveness that many staff and students feel may be readily anticipated: many students, for instance, might not be as accepting of their ideas being openly challenged in front of others, leading to assumptions that they have failed and thus should no longer offer further opinions. Such discussions

thus need curating to not only provide support and openness, but also to foster opportunities for spontaneous discussions—from a plethora of voices—that are impossible for teachers to plan or predict. Likewise, teaching staff need to be open and adapt to uncertainty and spontaneity in the classroom (and between classes, modules, years, etc.) to accept that learning can come from anywhere, not just planned activities, i.e., learning centred at the edges and not just the nodes of the map. Allowing for spontaneity to occur therefore requires acknowledging and removing its barriers in all facets of higher education, and not only within curriculum planning. This means addressing the assumptions inherent in cultural perceptions as well as those harboured internally on a personal level.

Assumptions are both easily dismissed and essential to consider critically in affecting real change (Børte, Nesje, and Lillejord, 2023). A central assumption that might be made by readers of this paper, published in a special issue, is that all academic colleagues share the same enthusiasm for changing modes of teaching and pedagogic research as this paper's potential readers. This is a baseline assumption that needs challenging by academics who truly wish to bring about change in designing thinking and co-designed teaching methods. Several academics across disciplines may have neither the time nor the inclination to keep up or engage with pedagogic literature— though this does not always mean they are uninterested in pedagogic best practices. Nevertheless, the evangelism of design thinking within higher education would greatly benefit from pauses of self-criticality: the strongest proponents of such approaches can at times be the most alienating to those who do not fully understand what the aims are, and therefore mistrust changes to the status quo. That the literature may already say what works and what does not—as posited by the call for this special issue—does not mean that this literature is universally absorbed across the entire higher education sector.

2.2. Academic literacy barriers to spontaneity

Similarly, assumptions around what students understand of an academic's meaning and intention behind teaching and curriculum design is essential to the communication and articulation of such approaches. The best intentions behind design thinking in teaching can be, and often are, undermined by poor communication and differing degrees of agreement. The concept of the 'curse of knowledge' is well established (Camerer, Loewenstein, and Weber, 1989, p. 1232), both within business and teaching, i.e., the greater one's familiarity is of a subject or system, the worse they can become at explaining it to others due to mismatched assumptions of context and comprehension (e.g., Xiong, Van Weelden, and Franconeri, 2019). The subject matter expert is not always the best proponent to garner support for and evangelise on that subject. Academics thus often vastly overestimate their students' understanding of the frameworks and logistics of higher education, especially in key areas such as assessments and formative assignments. This problem is well documented together with responses across the sector for calls to improve 'assessment literacy' (e.g., Meijer, et al. 2020 with a focus on collaboration, and critically by Popham, 2009).

In a similar vein, awareness or 'literacy' of what design thinking and designed spontaneity means for students is essential. Key to user-centred design, design thinking, and user research is the need to fully understand the problem, rather than

fixate purely on outcomes. The space to experiment, explore, and make mistakes by embracing uncertainty is easy to trumpet as a desirable teaching context for student experiences. But what is the point of modelling classrooms in which students are encouraged to take risks and fail? Embedded in this notion is the contrast between what students see as the basic proposition of their education—how their design degrees successfully translate to a job—and the value of uncertainty, error, failure, and risk-taking in managing a wide spectrum of tasks and careers. An appreciation of the models that allow for both is thus essential to building robust, relevant student experiences.

2.3. Assumptive barriers to spontaneity

It follows then that for spontaneity to occur naturally, there must be willingness on the part of all meeting stakeholders to relinquish degrees of control. In higher education, these stakeholders include students, teachers, and the designers (planners) of teaching. While students traditionally acknowledge that control or power within higher education spaces belong to the teacher, it is more challenging for us as teachers to relinquish control to other factors. This stems from myriad fears, including loss of attention from large number of students in lectures, to unintended content entering into exchanges during tutorials and small-group discussions. Yet, for spontaneity to occur naturally, control still needs to be sacrificed, at least in part. The design spontaneity model below shows how control can be methodically yielded in four stages in favour of spontaneous ideas and design serendipity.

Before that, though, in designing spontaneity into higher education planning and teaching, we continue to espouse the need for clear leadership and structure for teaching academics, but by focusing on creating specific contexts in which spontaneity is supported. Instead of rigid session plans or exacting weekly systems that force learning objectives, such contexts might be designed experiences that position and anticipate key "nucleation points" of spontaneity: examples include specific tasks, texts, challenges, and debate points that can be reasonably anticipated to emerge from a planned curriculum with sufficient room for birthing new ideas and novel solutions to old design problems. To achieve these results, lecturers—as with any user experience researchers—will need to be open to being guided and informed by insights that unexpectedly develop during student interactions, yet still maintain a position of leadership which guides the class to specific points of anticipated, though by no means guaranteed, outcomes.

3. Designed spontaneity from uncertainty

The use of "designed" spontaneity, instead of words such as "controlled" or "restricted" is deliberate, not just within a design thinking context, but on the grounds of more fundamental ideas of higher education 'teaching as design' (Goodyear, 2015). Where Goodyear might talk of planning, we are moving towards planning as anticipation—extending the activity centred design model of teaching (Goodyear, 2015, p.33), to one which may not even plan an exact activity, but a meta-activity through with specific activities would emerge. Beghetto (2017) champions 'Lesson Unplanning' to make room for the 'to-be-determined', in line with the positioning of good uncertainty as an opportunity. McLaughlan, Pert, and Lodge, (2021) promote the

concept of 'productive uncertainty'—and it is this idea that is core to the current mode, maintaining the conditions for uncertainty to be productive, and not deleterious. The combination of the terms collaboration and spontaneity is not new to higher education—as early as 1993 Tang proposed 'Spontaneous Collaborative Learning' or 'SCOLL'. In SCOLL, however, the focus was in response to an even more traditional academic context, with a focus on bringing about collaboration specifically, with explicit articulation of the 'to-be-determined' in Beghetto (2017).

Cooperative learning has already been characterised as an activity that increases risk (Tang, 1993, Ozment, 2018) and here we extend that to the concept of spontaneity. Just as increases collaboration requires the acceptance of risk (Ozment, 2018) in the classroom setting, so too does spontaneity: and this must be for both teachers and learners.

3.1. Reflective development of a new model for co-spontaneity

Combining the reflections from our own practice above, with the context sketched by the literature, we now present a schematic method for representing the gain in spontaneity at the cost of increased risk. This practice has encompassed teaching at all levels from undergraduate teaching to professional training across multiple institutions for over a decade. Across this range of experience, we consistently observed our students' responses to 'the practical realities of tackling design questions' (Tovey, 2015, p. 3).

Problematically, our initial conceptions of 'practical realities' assumed the information provided within the planned curriculum would be sufficient for students to generate the responses we anticipated; as such, control and limited in line with what was provided seemed appropriate and we expected that the introduction of uncertainties would be negatively received by our students. What became clear upon reflection was that spontaneity played a significant role in student responses, in the more dynamic and open parts of feedback and workshops. As we have discussed, the idea of spontaneity in higher education teaching is not new. However, such approaches have not been formally modelled along the lines of treating design teaching as contextualised meeting spaces in which higher education students exercise varying degrees of autonomous discovery across a set of pre-determined zones.

Building from the above, we examined various combinations of classroom controls with concomitant possibilities for spontaneity to occur, from absolute chaos to absolute control. The result is the proposed model, below, which abstracts our observations on how co-spontaneity into four zones—with the fourth zone being seen as optimal, (especially for initiatives like SaLT and CDT). We thus present this nascent model as a tool for reflection and discussion in the placement of teaching activities for designing commensurate levels of spontaneity.

Figure 1 shows the co-spontaneity model in its first zone, i.e., zone 1: This stage represents the traditional classroom whereby the teacher 'T' maintains absolute control over a classroom of students 'S'. The closed classroom does not allow any externalities or sites of nucleation (represented by the arrows) leading to uncertainty, risk, and thus spontaneity. (While we have used the terms 'teacher' and 'student' here, the approach

of this model can also be mapped onto faculty meetings for teaching development, where S might represent staff instead.)

Figure 1: Co-spontaneity model: Zone 1
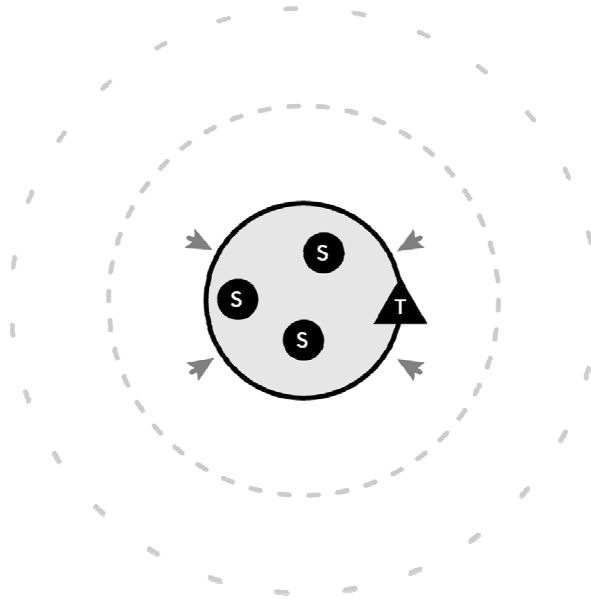
In zone 1 learning spaces, uncertainty and risk are reduced to a minimum and meetings (such as traditional lectures) are isolated to a unidirectional teaching approach, whereby the teacher exercises full authority over ideation, discussions, and delivery. Examples of such instances include lectures and presentations. Such spaces are unlikely to effectively facilitate design thinking on the part of participants, and likewise often quite different to the kinds of teaching interactions desired by those applying design thinking to the design of higher education.

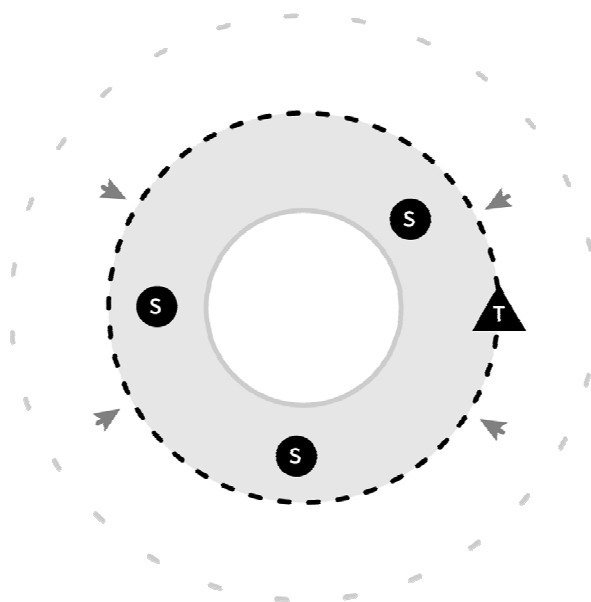**Figure 2: Co-spontaneity model: Zone 2**

Figure 2 represents zone 2, a more familiar state of design classrooms whereby the teacher 'T' maintains control over a classroom of students 'S' (in a traditional activity such as a seminar). The semi-permeable classroom allows for modest externalities or sites of nucleation (represented by the arrows) leading to some degrees of uncertainty, risk, and thus spontaneity.

In zone 2 learning spaces, small degrees of uncertainty and risk are permitted, though meetings are mostly relegated to a unidirectional teaching approach, whereby the teacher exercises significant degrees of authority over ideation, discussions, and delivery, but conversations between stakeholders allowed to occur. Examples of such instances include small group lectures and tutorials.

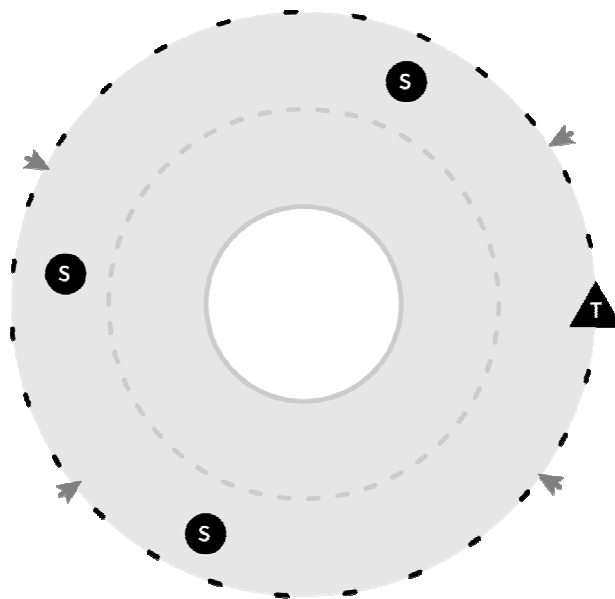**Figure 3: Co-spontaneity model: Zone 3**

Figure 3, above, represents the most idealised state, i.e. zone 3, of design classrooms whereby the teacher 'T' maintains leadership over a classroom of students 'S'. The permeable classroom allows for high levels of externalities or sites of nucleation (represented by the arrows) leading to commensurate degrees of uncertainty, risk, and thus spontaneity.

In zone 3 learning spaces, significant degrees of uncertainty and risk are permitted; meetings take on a multidirectional teaching approach, whereby the teacher exercises only leadership over the classroom; ideation, discussions, and delivery occur equally between stakeholders. Examples of such instances include interactive tutorials, brainstorming sessions, and live debate-style assignments that rely on real-time research and responses.

Zone 3 learning spaces offer the admittance of useful degrees of uncertainty and risk, which in turn increase the chances of spontaneity but also keep these instances at useful levels. Design thinking is subsequently allowed to flourish under such

conditions, provided the number of students and permitted spontaneous events are directed under the leadership of the teacher. While not every classroom setting can be configured to meet the ideal standards of zone 3, we posit that several extant teaching experiences can be recomposed—in varying measures—to maximise the benefits of co-spontaneity in design-led teaching.

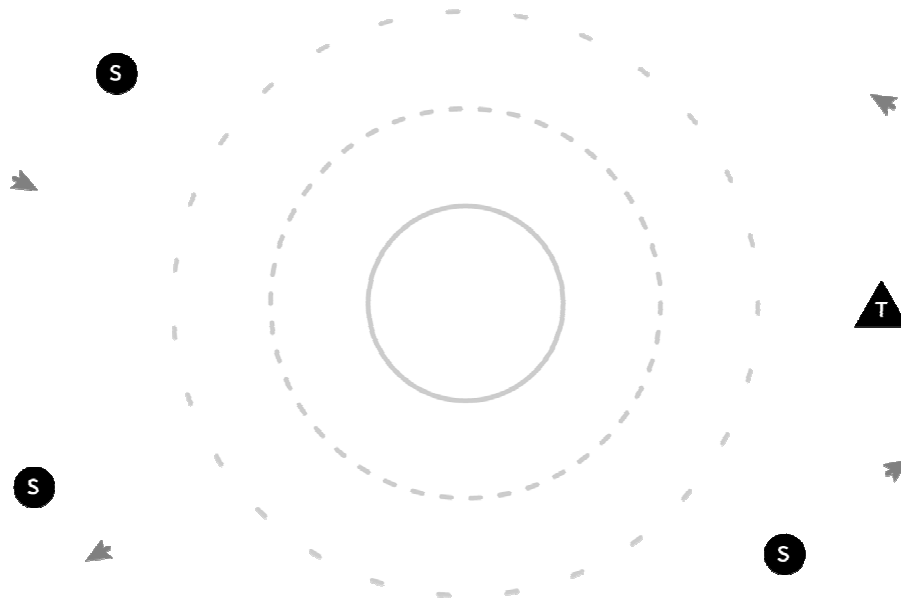**Figure 4: Co-spontaneity model: Zone 4**

Figure 4 shows the end stage of the co-spontaneity model, i.e. zone 4. This stage represents a more chaotic state of learning environment whereby the teacher 'T' does not maintain any control or leadership over a classroom of students 'S'. The fully open environment allows for infinite levels of externalities or sites of nucleation (represented by the arrows) leading to infinite, and therefore unwanted, degrees of uncertainty, risk, and spontaneity.

In zone 4 learning spaces, there is little value to the uncertainty and risk that are permitted; meetings structures break down and teaching approaches are lost; the teacher is unable to exercise leadership over stakeholders; ideation, discussions, and delivery can occur at any point between stakeholders. Here lack of control may be interpreted by students as staff not doing their jobs properly, rather than as welcome freedom to explore. This is a space where potential negatives to design thinking approaches could emerge – including disconnection between learning goals (see more potential risk explored in Panke, 2019, p.299).

Zone 4 learning spaces are undesirable from a pedagogic point of view since we have previously attested to the need for leadership and useful degrees of control over the classroom. The minimum scaffolding needed to maintain design thinking systems is stripped away under these conditions. Scaffolding and literacy are important in zone 3

as well, as students may be more used to 1 and 2 from traditional school settings, and so need support to thrive in uncertainty.

4. Conclusion

Meetings can be conceived of in a range of ways within higher education, from classroom sessions to faculty teaching planning. In all of these, however, the negative connotations often attached to the term 'meeting' can be reconsidered by an optimistic anticipation of designed co-spontaneity. This is something, as a designed and anticipated state, that requires action—changes in culture, literacy, and assumptions. A first step in achieving action is reflection leading to an awareness of currents norms and the changes that would be desirable: it is here that the present model aims to help. In order to strengthen and embed design thinking approaches within higher education, which must utilise uncertainty to be effective as they diverge from traditional approaches, the application of design thinking is itself needed. We suggest that this collaborative engagement with design thinking requires a focus on, and critical re-consideration of, what meetings can and should be in higher education, rather than an avoidance of them. In a future for higher education where uncertainty is embraced and harnessed as productive spontaneity, it is essential that we remember that uncertainty is not something that can just be applied to students: it must be accepted by teachers as a collaborative approach.

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