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Citation: Boys, Jos (2008) Between unsafe spaces and the comfort zone? Exploring the impact of learning environments on 'doing' learning. In: eLearning and Learning Environments for the future, 5 June 2008, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK.

Published by: UNSPECIFIED

URL: <http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/solstice/conference2008/>

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Between unsafe spaces and the comfort zone?

Exploring the impact of learning environments on ‘doing’ learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how learning can be understood as a liminal space or transitional journey from one way of knowing to another; and where ‘doing’ learning is as much about being inculcated into the un-noticed rules and conventions of education itself as it is about developing understanding of the content of a subject discipline.

By starting from Meyer and Land’s notion of threshold concepts and from ethnomethodological approaches which explore the ‘problematic accomplishment’ of everyday social and spatial practices, this paper considers how both new e-learning environments and more traditional face-to-face settings intersect with, and impact on, our conventional routines for producing and recognizing learning. Through a case study of a design project with interior architecture students, it explores what happened when attempts were made to inculcate a complex threshold concept - offering an alternative understanding of the relationship between disability and architecture to ‘standard’ conventions of accessibility – in both the ‘normal’ studio environment and online, via a blog.

The paper concludes by suggesting we need to understand much more about what kinds of unspoken social and spatial practices frame the learning process in different disciplines in order to explore how we can create effective liminal spaces for both teachers and learners.

KEYWORDS

Interior architecture, disability, ethnomethodology, threshold concepts, troublesome knowledge,

INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasing interest recently in the unspoken interactions embedded in learning and teaching; the commonplace, un-noticed rules and procedures of everyday engagements through which education takes place. Ryave and Schenkein gave such interactions the active sense of ‘doing’ to underscore “the concerted

accomplishment of members of the community involved as a matter of course in (their) production and recognition.” (1974:265)

In universities and colleges, ‘doing’ learning is the process through which students are inculcated into both the appropriate practices of their subject discipline and of higher education itself. How, then, are new e-learning technologies and learning environments intersecting with, and impacting on, our conventional routines for producing and recognising such accomplishments? Here, I want to explore some of the resonances, discomforts, gaps and unintended consequences that can occur when ‘standard’ routines are shifted.

This paper starts from a case study of the experiences of some second year undergraduate interior architecture students working with a group of deaf and disabled artists on an interior architecture project, undertaken through both studio-based interactions and an online blog. The project aim was to explore alternative concepts for thinking about disability and architecture - beyond the conventional assumptions of accessibility with its focus on technical solutions - by working with deaf and disabled artists as tutors. In fact, I will argue, it was the associated shifts in ‘normal’ student-tutor relationships and procedures – particularly in an e-environment - which raised complex, unspoken reactions from all participants and which most affected the project’s success in getting some “troublesome knowledge” (Perkins 2003: 7) to ‘stick’ (Meyer and Land 2006). This paper therefore aims to explore relationships between the teaching and learning of a complex and radical concept, the ‘congealed understandings’ (Cousin 2006:4) within existing and unspoken social and spatial educational practices, and different types of learning environment.

THE PROJECT

This research is based on an Arts Council funded project called *Making Discursive Spaces*. In May 2007, seven deaf and disabled artists collaborated with a group of ten 2nd year undergraduate interior architecture students at the University of Brighton, UK, on a design project for creating artists’ studios in a dilapidated London warehouse. The central aim was to begin to find new kinds of ‘discursive spaces’ for engaging with disability and difference in interior architecture. When given the opportunity to intervene in the design teaching process, how might bringing in ‘Others’ as tutors rather than clients or users challenge assumptions about what constitutes ‘normal’ interior space, ‘normal’ design processes or ‘normal’ educational frameworks?

As the project progressed, the most immediately powerful impact on students’ learning was in shifting their perceptions of the role of the senses in designing. The students all reported feeling themselves much more intensely in the material spaces around them; expanding their awareness of their own bodily sensations and taking notice of barriers in the built environment they had previously ignored. As one student commented: “I felt my space, because the disabled artists have helped me put me in my space..” (student feedback 11/05/07)

For the artist-tutors, though, this increasing awareness of tactility, movement and gesture was only a first step; these were seen as only the most immediate, intuitive and 'commonsense' responses to their presence. Instead the deaf and disabled artists were interested in how this beginning understanding and willingness might be enabled to impact on the students detailed design work – and, as the project progressed, expressed frustration about how difficult such a 'leap' seemed to be to engender.

Making Discursive Spaces increasingly focused, then, on the problems of transition (in concepts) and translation (from concept to action) for students. How could they be shifted from these new interpretative feelings about space to a more general understanding of what a disabled-led creative perspective might entail, and then be enabled to begin to translate this idea *into* their design project, so as to be able to creatively adapt an existing space for a diversity of users? As existing research on "threshold concepts" (Meyer and Land 2006) in educational processes suggests, in aiming to make discursive spaces in this project (<http://www.discursivepaces.co.uk>) all its participants were deliberately positioned in a liminal space, and asked to undertake a transitional and potentially 'unsafe' journey. We aimed to support both tutors and learners in this through two main vehicles, studio-based project tutorials and a blog (<http://www.discursivepaces.blogspot.com>). We hoped that these two different environments would offer, on the one hand, a mode of operation they knew and felt comfortable with (the known, safe space of the studio environment and project mode), and, on the other, via an online learning environment a more open-ended space for collaborative discussions about the process. How successful, then, were these two sorts of spaces in enabling students to 'get', and then act on, the concept of disability as a creative generator for interior design?

TOO SAFE A SPACE? THE STUDIO ENVIRONMENT AND 'CONGEALED UNDERSTANDINGS'

Not surprisingly, students were at different levels in their overall understanding of design, which affected how much they could absorb from the artists. As second year undergraduates, they were, after all, only just beginning to explore how to interpret relationships between personal, social and cultural activities and material space and to respond creatively and appropriately with designed interventions. They could recognise the artists' different insights but particularly lacked many 'translatory' tools to take these forward into a design method or realization:

Some students coped with the set of circumstances and some were just busy coping with whole premise of the project and the course.

Some dived right in and some just dipped their toes in and some shuffled around like moles...

Some of the students seemed to be avoiding access issues or maybe it was fear or not knowing.

(Artists' feedback 11/05/07)

Many of learner design responses, therefore, were in line with those found by Meyer and Land and others – attempting to construct "their own conditions of safety through

the practice of mimicry” (Cousin 2006: 5), where design realizations included some superficial additions for disabled people, but revealed that students had failed to understand the deeper integrative nature of disability-led design as a concept. We also found two other strategies in operation by learners, attempting to stay in their ‘comfort zones’ rather than engage with the risks they were being asked to take.

First, as expected, within the safe space of the studio tutorial, tutors and learners connected easily through a shared knowledge of its implicit and shared conventions and practices. Students and artists found the tutorials fruitful on both sides, particularly in working through issues in relation to a specific design:

For me the 1:1 contact, particularly when Rachel gave me such a good reference to an artist who I could go and explore – it was a perfect reference for me.

A breakthrough for me was when both Naomi and Rubbena actually talked about about how they use their artist studio/space or any space when they are making work... so learning about, for example, the light and materials that were good to have around them.

I just got so much exploring the lift as a separate and more meaningful fun inclusive experience alongside the obvious logic of lifts re: access.’

(Students’ feedback 11/05/07)

Studio days therefore flourished through the known and unspoken conventions of shared and informal discussion of work in progress, using simultaneous sketching and talk, exploring design analysis, precedents, appropriate materials and technologies and alternative design ideas. However, this may have actually made it harder to introduce our new concept; there was a tendency by students to ‘fall back’ on the standard routines of already inculcated design concepts and procedures, where as Cousin cautions us:

A threshold concept can be a form of disciplinary property and as such, its presentation in a curriculum may carry an inherent tendency to invite congealed understandings. (Cousin 2006:4)

Thus the deaf and disabled artist-tutors became increasingly clear that the students’ designs needed to start *differently* from their usual (already inculcated) approaches. They wanted designing to begin from a detailed study of practicalities so as to generate creative ideas, whilst the conventional process in design education is to start from a general conceptual idea, and then develop to increasing levels of detail. In fact – whatever the tutors said or did – in most design propositions students engagement with disability returned by the end of the project to its ‘normal’ framing within building design education and practice as ‘accessibility’; added on as a detailing problem in the final stages of this conventional idea-detail cycle. The unspoken strength (and appearance of certainty) of existing studio practices won out over the troublesome concepts we were offering, with all students ultimately ‘falling back’ on what they already knew about how design ‘works’ and how disability ‘fits’ within it.

Second, this tendency to fall back on - rather than have the confidence to challenge - “congealed understandings” was exacerbated by student perceptions of the context in which they were operating. In previous projects I have found that another learner response to difficult threshold concepts was to try and double-guess ‘what the tutor wants’ and produce appropriate work in response. This may be particularly true in the design disciplines, where tutor-learner relationships are usually quite personal and informal, and content dealt with implicitly and individually, often making students very anxious as to what is being asked of them. In the case of *Making Discursive Spaces*, the recognition by all the students involved of the project’s outsider status, meant that they predominantly looked to what *other* tutors in the School thought as a means of informing their design choices.

In addition, students were all too aware that the disability-led aspect of the project not officially assessed and that other tutors were not all supportive of incorporating deaf and disability issues into the design studio. This was because some tutors were made uncomfortable in different ways about how such a project fitted into the wider curriculum or into the predominant but unspoken discourse - the very assumption we were trying to challenge - that learning about disability was only about accessibility. This was problematic because within design education accessibility is conventionally and implicitly understood as simultaneously politically correct, marginal, boring and technical. In this context other tutors were worried that introducing disability as a design issue was a potentially ‘unfair’ critique if applied to the other design studio projects running in parallel:

It felt hard to battle what was obviously the academic agenda and the way things are organised for the students.
(Artists’ feedback 11/05/07)

We would need to know that going through this and learning from it and feeling differently should be endorsed by all the staff, so they encourage us to build this thinking into all our assignments.
I just don’t think I will not think these issues through the next time. The problem is when some tutors actually actively stop you from thinking about these issues.
I just hope the tutors will taking this on board and not say things like ‘are you putting a lift in because you think you have to...?’
(Students’ feedback 11/05/07)

Thus, in our experience, students ‘heard’ and responded to this wider context more than the advice from their artist-tutors.

ONLINE LEARNING AND UNSAFE SPACES

The intention of providing an online environment in parallel to the studio space was to enable another kind of discursive space to the conventional project mode, which could open up a variety of discussions beyond the design process, framed as follows:

- How to enable design students to learn from the experiences of deaf and disabled people
- How to understand what makes good design for a diversity of users
- How deaf and disabled artists can inform building design more generally

Perhaps naively it was assumed that this environment could enable different registers to operate simultaneously – project updates, information and resources, informal chat, sharing of work-in-progress as well as explorations of wider issues. In fact, using the blog was more much problematic for both artists and students than the studio environment. In part this was due to more problems with access to the internet, and using the blog itself, than had been expected; but it was also because participants were anxious about how and what to communicate with each other:

I couldn't get on it.

Sometimes I posted stuff up and it never appeared.

I spent some time putting my stuff up and then received no comments so I felt a bit disheartened.

I actually found the 1:1 more immediate and valuable.

(Students' feedback 11/05/07)

There were also issues of language and tone. Some participants found it too academic. Others felt unsure about how considered or immediate their posts or responses were meant to be, and expressed anxiety about what different participants would think of their comments, or that these might be found offensive or at the 'wrong' level:

The language in the blog was quite academic and intensive, I found it quite alienating and it was hard to connect with it.

I was concerned about how I came across. I didn't express how I felt because I wanted to be sensitive, so I didn't say half of what I would have liked to have said.

I am not an academic and I would have to sit and think about what was being said and sometimes I would have to get my dictionary out.'

(Artists feedback 11/05/07)

Finally, as with the project more broadly, participants were unsure about the status or authority of the online environment; about whether it was assessed and how its content should intersect with the studio-based work. Students were most confident using it to post simple descriptions of their work, or to give positive feedback to the artists. Tutors were most comfortable using it to share information about, for example, useful web resources.

The lack of success of the blog was partly about differences in participants' experiences and aims for the Making Discursive Spaces project – the tensions and potentially contradictory aims its academic, artistic and political threads. But it also clearly perceived as an 'unsafe' space, without commonsense, shared or explicit conventions for the production and recognition of learning. It neither had obvious conventions, nor

had we attempted to design any rules 'in'. Ultimately, then, whilst the student feedback to the *Making Discursive Spaces* project was very positive about their experiences of, and learning from, the deaf and disabled artists involved, the resulting design work was disappointing and indicated that none of the students has 'got' the underlying concept about how to re-think relationships between disability and architecture. We had not found a way of generating a liminal space *between* the un-noticed and safe routines of the studio and the discomfiting space of the blog, which might have better enabled creative risks to be taken and some troublesome knowledge inculcated.

ENVIRONMENTS, SOCIO-SPATIAL CONVENTIONS AND THE PROBLEM OF 'DOING' LEARNING

How, then, can we begin to develop an understanding of what went on in the unspoken interactions which framed the *Making Discursive Spaces* project? How might we have improved the outcomes, in terms of student 'getting' the concept of disability as a creative generator for design practice, and better supported them through the liminal spaces and uncomfortable journeys we asked them to undertake?

This project started from an understanding of teaching and learning based on constructivist models – that is, that learning happens through dialogic processes between tutor and student, student and student and student and design, particularly in how a student is enabled to 'talkback' their developing understanding of a subject both verbally to others and non-verbally through their design resolution.

However, it was also interested in how these 'conversational' events accumulate through time and in a variety of contexts so as to successfully inculcate students into a particular discipline –here, interior architecture - both in how they think and in how they act. Rather than being seen as obvious, comprehensive or consistent, this process of inculcation is conceptualized as being uneven, contested and incorporating potential tensions for all its participants. This is both in terms of the bodies of knowledge of a subject, which are not fixed but constantly in flux as alternative approaches are negotiated (a process where education has a major, but also particular role in a vocational subject like architecture); and in terms of educational processes which contain implicit and explicit rules that must themselves be 'learnt' by tutors and students alike, but which can also be challenged, refused or misunderstood.

Into this already difficult and liminal space, the *Making Discursive Spaces* project added another layer of complexity, by exploring how to engage students with a radical concept not already embedded in the routine conventions and practices of either the education or discipline of interior architecture. How, then, did this problematic conceptual space for learning intersect with the environments and processes through which it took place?

I began this paper by suggesting that the concept of learning as a 'problematic accomplishment' through shared, repetitive micro-patterns of production and recognition across a community of practice (here, interior architecture education) opened up the possibilities of examining the unspoken conventions of both a discipline area and its

educational processes. By a careful observation of repetitive small-scale socio-spatial actions, ethnomethodology offers a method for revealing how 'commonsense' understandings of the world are endlessly reproduced through mundane unspoken interactions - whether the intuitive knowledge learnt through both our everyday lived experiences or the 'congealed understandings' inculcated through the implicit social and spatial conventions and procedures of university education.

What researchers such as Ryave and Schenkein did not examine is how our commonsense social and spatial routines operate as contested processes, that is for example, where everyday practices are not shared or consensual but instead lead to feelings of discomfort or confusion in some participants who may not feel they 'belong', or where such everyday practices themselves are ambiguous or undergoing processes of contestation (Bhabha 1994). Glynis Cousin has explored some such 'internally disputed' concepts in an educational context, looking at how students learn the notion of Otherness "where the instability of the concept is part of its territory." (2006:135). She underlines the importance of subject position in how easy or difficult a concept such as Otherness is to grasp, dependent on what people bring to it emotionally or socially, and suggests different ways in which 'where they come from' may affect how they 'get' such a concept.

In the *Making Discursive Spaces* project, we found that, whatever their background experience and identity any assumptions students might have had about disability were quickly dispelled by the proximity of a diverse range of deaf and disabled artists. Whilst 'Otherness' was central to our project, the different subject positions across learners that impacted most on the project seemed less about their personal identities, and more about how they stood in relation to the problem of 'doing' learning.

This was first, the extent to which they had already absorbed the conventional rules of how design education 'works' in the context of their particular course; second, their individual grasp of various threshold concepts about design which they brought to this project from their previous learning experiences; third, their degree of confidence in operating in the liminal space of exploratory rather than fixed concepts; and fourth, the extent to which they were influenced by their perceptions of the wider project context.

In fact not just students but all participants brought to the project their different assumptions about the core concepts, 'proper' environments and conventional practices of design (and/or art) education. This affected how they intersected with the two different learning environments, one face-to-face and one online, through which *Making Discursive Spaces* took place. Most crucially, the assumption that the safety of a conventionally framed project and studio experience would enable the students to open up in their design approaches and ideas seemed not to have that effect; instead it may have made it easier for students ignore the "troublesome knowledge" they were being offered by 'falling back' on an already learnt pattern of design project methods and values.

At the same time, the lack of any explicit, shared, or known conventions for interacting within the e-learning environment of the blog meant that it lacked the conditions for the production or recognition of “the concerted accomplishment of members of the community involved as a matter of course”.

From our experiences, then, I would suggest that the problem of ‘doing’ learning is not about the affordances of, or differences between, e-learning and face-to-face environments per se. Rather, we need to interrogate each specific learning environment as an intersecting relationship between the concepts we are trying to teach and the underlying social and spatial conventions through which we attempt to get those concepts across. This paper has begun to explore how different learning spaces can make participants (tutors as well as learners) feel safe or uncomfortable, and the impact this can have on their learning. It has proposed that in the *Making Discursive Spaces* project, supporting students in a transitional move from one state of understanding to another was, on the one hand, held back by the very recognisability of the spaces in which we were operating; and on the other by the strangeness of having ‘standard’ routines shifted, without clear alternative rules being offered. This suggests that we need to know much more about our conventional routines for producing and recognising the accomplishment of ‘doing’ learning - and to understand how these can be positively and appropriately adapted and translated across the types of e-learning technologies and learning environments developing in the future.

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**Presented at “E-learning and Learning Environments for the future”
Solstice 2008 Conference, thursday 5th June, Edge Hill University, UK**