ENTERING THE TARDIS: EXPLORING THE WORKING SPACE OF A TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

Studies of learning spaces commonly focus on post-occupancy evaluations of building performance (Cleveland & Fisher, 2014), and in reference to use, on the relationship between the physical space and student outcomes (Blackmore, Bateman, Loughlin, O’Mara & Aranda, 2011). However, the school is not only a (student) learning space, but also a (teacher) working space. This perspective appears to be under-reported, with the voice and experiences of the teacher in danger of being marginalised in spatial evaluations. In particular, specialist teachers seem to be silent participants, with a ‘generic’ teacher being the representative of the profession. This presentation draws on a pilot study that explores, using an observational metric tool and participant art specialist interviews, teacher topologies in the art room. This pilot study will lead to research that develops evidence concerning the similarities or differences between subject-specific teacher use of space, the relevance of this phenomenon to our current understandings, and, through teacher voice, will inform that previously elusive concept of subject-specific utilisation of learning spaces.

KEYWORDS: TEACHER PRACTICE, SUBJECT SPECIFIC SPACE USE.

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How school rooms should be configured, and the reasons for this has been debated for quite some time. From the constraints of classrooms designed for large groups of students sitting in rows of desks, through Dewey’s Laboratory School to the new learning environments of the early twenty-first century (Burke & Grosvenor, 2008; Cleveland & Fisher, 2014; Dudek, 2005; Imms, Cleveland & Fisher, 2016), the design of the classroom has been an important element in what educators think of when learning outcomes of children are discussed. Perhaps the most explicitly outlined was the ‘Third Teacher’ concept of the Reggio Emilia pre-schools in Italy, which describes a pedagogy of relationships between child and environment (Edwards, Gandini & Forman 1998; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). In the last decade, more overt connections between the physical learning space and learning outcomes have been made (Blackmore, Bateman, O’Mara, Loughlin, & Aranda, 2011; DEECD, 2008; Lippman, 2010). Responding to these, Australian governments have financed the building of new educational spaces in the hope of improving student outcomes.

The trends in the literature have pointed to an evolution from the term ‘classroom’ to ‘learning environment / learning space / creative space’ and other similar iterations within which the virtual and the physical may co-exist. With this terminological shift comes an allied shift to the outcomes for students, including the conscious presence of the student voice. An aspect of this growing interest in the relationship between the learning environment and learning outcomes has been an appreciation of the need to teach for creativity (though definitions of which can be fluid), leading to a commensurate interest in creatively designed spaces. If the space is creative, then, ipso facto, creativity will be elicited from the students. However, there appears to be a dearth of literature as to how the teacher is positioned within this equation, either becoming a cypher through which prescribed outcomes and behaviour may be monitored rather than an active participant within the educational environment, or not being considered at all. Without understanding how teachers’ perceptions of learning environments and their place within these intersect with their practice, development of educational building design will be lopsided in scope and outcome, and may be short-lived.

However, there is silence regarding how subject specific teachers actually inhabit their work space (Fisher, 2005). The notion of educational space being designed with specific spatial qualities for particular pedagogical activities, as proposed by Fisher (Boone, 2010), aligns with Boone’s (2010) suggestion that students have different learning styles that require classroom spaces with their preferred modality. In addition, specialist subjects, such as visual arts, require specialist spaces. However, little is known about the prerequisite affordances of such spaces and how these are utilised by the specialist teachers.

Anecdotally, visual arts teachers use their spaces in a different manner than other disciplines. Why this is so, is difficult to ascertain without evidence. Is it based on the individual teacher’s perception of their space, and the inhabitation of it? How does the process of teaching, and making art exist within the context of the perceived art space? Are there any connections between the perceived space and the design qualities and affordances described by Thomas (2010) - these qualities being considered intrinsic within an arts curriculum?

In my doctoral research I explore how visual arts educators use the educational space to enhance learning. To find a suitable measuring tool for my study, I took the opportunity to test one out during the transition from the old Melbourne Graduate School of Education art space to the new one, studioFive. This is a place where pre-service teachers, both generalist and specialist, are trained. In the current study, I present a small snapshot of the preliminary findings, focusing on one teacher’s practice.

The old art space was recognisable to any person who has either been a student or an art teacher. It was a rectangular box with a paint-spattered concrete floor, one wall with floor to ceiling storage next to a studio technician’s office. The opposite wall had the data projector, a teacher’s table with computer, and a
whiteboard. In between were closely-set tables and chairs that were seldom moved, being both heavy and noisy—so noisy that offices on the floor below complained when students moved their seats. The most surprising element for a visual art studio was the lack of windows. Any natural light came from skylights. This did, however, allow for the walls to have lots of art examples to peruse. I sat at the back of the room, observational metric tool at the ready. The students had been told about my presence - that I was there to observe their teacher. Other than a brief smile from one or two of them, I seemed to be ignored.

From the start, I noticed the dynamic movements of the teacher. She had set up the art experience previously but rather than positioning herself behind the teacher's table, she moved swiftly from one area to another, asking questions, giving directions, and provoking discussions. A student's question elicited a drawing on the whiteboard which required information from the internet, which led to processes being described, materials being handed out and further questions, from both the teacher and students. It happened so quickly that I had difficulty keeping up with the observational metric tool. This was not a clean, linear progression through a scripted lesson; rather it seemed more like a musical improvisation, punctuated periodically with discussion and mutual laughter. As the students became more focused on their own art works, voices became more muted. The teacher, walking between the tables, made suggestions and offered insights. When one of the students asked about a particular aspect, the group's attention was sought to offer advice before retreating back to their works in progress. The effect was of a mentor working alongside apprentices, albeit in cramped circumstances.

I next viewed this teacher and her students after they had moved to the new area, studioFive. They had been there for only a short period and had to acclimatise rapidly to the new affordances the space had to offer. It had been designed to be flexible, adaptable and a place to model current art teaching practices to pre-service teachers. There was no designated teacher space and it was open to observers from many viewpoints as glass walls punctuate its rhomboid-like form. Walls can be pushed back whilst tables, chairs and easels can be moved easily. Three large, black C.O.W.S.—computers on wheels—are situated in the area, able to be plugged into a variety of points. Natural light from the eastern and southern windows suffuses the space and is bolstered with banks of lights.

The students had created their own areas of making and peer-teaching within the larger space. Interestingly, I was no longer drawn to the teacher as the primary focus. There were pockets of activity occurring in different areas and in different configurations. The teacher now moved more between groups and individuals, rather than directing the whole, as the responsibility had shifted from teacher to student. Moving between roles with seeming ease, she directed her students’ attention towards a particular task when needed, but rather than dictate their work, the students were given the space to explore their own responses. When a question was directed towards her that would benefit others, she called the group's attention and discussed the issue with them, describing it to me as being akin to blowing up a balloon.

The 'how' of the teacher's practice was clear but it was the 'why' that equally piqued my interest. She was an experienced teacher, having taught for over 15 years and had worked in a variety of schools. I wanted to know what was behind her methods in such disparate spaces and at the start of our interview I asked her what she perceived to be her role.

She was forthright in her view of herself as both an artist AND an art teacher. Part of this stemmed from her art teacher mother who had immersed her in the art world from an early age. This had then been further developed during her time in a fine arts college where she worked in huge open spaces, in a variety of art forms, curating both the space and the art. This experience directly led to how, as a head art teacher, she worked to achieve something similar for her secondary students. She viewed the understanding of the process of making art as vital, and the space where art was made as an important
part of this understanding. To this end, she worked closely with an architect in redesigning the art wing to somewhat simulate the shared spaces of the art college. After initial hesitation from her colleagues, they embraced the possibilities presented and students could fluidly move between classes to get feedback from different audiences and teachers.

I asked her about how space impacted on her teaching, and her view was that she could teach art anywhere, just as art can be made anywhere. She could, she said, even work in a shed. Her teaching was not predicated on the space. She viewed an available space as the perception of its possibilities, rather than its apparent constraints, that mandated its actual use. The question for me was, if she can teach anywhere, could her students learn anywhere? Would their learning experiences be ‘better’ if the space was designed for flexible learning? Is space important for learning or not? I was really interested in how her students reacted to her practices within the space? Though her view of the room was positive, she felt that it had not changed her practice. Rather, the ability for the students to move to their own space, to work without interrupting others or being interrupted, to work individually or with others, and to touch base with her when needed, fitted into her ethos of being a facilitator of knowledge. A particular aspect of the new space that interested her was that the students were able to utilise the space to develop their own projects and then share these with their peers and others.

The observation of one visual art teacher cannot lead to definitive, causative statements about how art teachers as a group use classroom space. This representative did not consider space to be a container of learning but rather as a place of possibilities for herself and her students. This experience has left me with more questions than I initially had. The use of the observational metric tool allowed me to collect evidence on how teachers work. However, it is also necessary to explore why they approach the space in the ways they do, so that their positioning within the learning environments debate may be given a voice.
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