'Laboratories of Learning': Learning to Learn in Co-created Communities of Practice

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Abstract:
During the pandemic, through university feedback mechanisms, our students expressed the need for coming together in communities of belonging. Within this context, our study focuses on how we all learn can highlight our belonging. We argue for a need to implement a more explicit process to keep developed connections more permanent, by implementing co-creative and collective learning spaces, so our students can engage in their understanding of what it means to learn. This exploratory investigation underpinned by participatory action research (PAR) methodology uses focus group, workshops co-designed with students and peer-delivered sessions, to gain insights into what conditions would prompt students to 1) talk about learning as a practice beyond subject knowledge; 2) what conditions would be needed for students to want to share with others insights about their learning, and 3) what conditions would be needed to create student communities of learning, which we are calling 'Laboratories of Learning'.

Keywords: Co-creation, Laboratories, Design Education, Learning Communities

1. Introduction

When do we know we have learnt something? Is it from the grade we get at the end of a course, or the feedback given to us? Is it when we suddenly realise that something we had always thought we did not understand became clearer and useful? Is it when we can explain it to someone else or when we can teach what we have learnt to others? Is it all these things and more? At our creative arts and design university, we have noticed that we often make assumptions about how we/our students learn and therefore how we teach. The impact of the pandemic has brought this realisation into sharp focus and with urgency.

Our research aims to put theories about learning into practice as we put assumptions aside and start with a truly co-creative and collective space where students and staff can test out ideas in safe, brave and daring spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013 and Vogel, 2020). We are calling these spaces 'Laboratories of Learning,' leading from our main research question: how can we co-create active participatory

places where we all can learn to learn? We aim to create more effective and affective educational practices that are engagingly compelling, diverse, and inclusive. We use as, Dave Cormier (2008) suggests, "… a rhizomatic model of learning [and a] rhizomatic model of knowledge [which] is negotiated, and the learning experience is a social as well as a personal knowledge creation process with mutable goals and constantly negotiated premises" (para. 4). The proposed 'Laboratories of Learning' assemble a community of practice where all our students can feel they belong and be a place where they can learn how to learn. They mingle with students from all educational stages, from undergraduate students, along with taught postgraduate and doctoral level students.

We concur with Jean Lave (1992) when he says: "If learning is part of subjects' participation in the varied activities in communities of practice, it suggests that we have too hastily taken "learning" to be encompassed in the notion of 'knowledge acquisition'" (para. 8). We also question some of the ideas found in traditional design education (Souleles, 2013), to see if they are still useful in making spaces for creative learning and critical thinking so all our students can be fruitfully engaged in their understanding of what it means to learn. In response to these considerations, learning spaces appeared as a useful concept, referring to a territory defined by practice-based learning, inhabited by a network of people, ideas, and objects in movement (Fendler, 2013, p.787). Moreover, "…thinking of place in terms of practice is a strategy for uprooting the inquiry and setting it in motion, to better follow the mobile and transitory learning trajectories of young people (Fendler, 2013, p.787). Thus, we focus on developing a process to create participatory spaces for students to come together in a community of learning practice, which this paper offers an account of.

2. Context

The key themes that frame our approach stem from the insights gained in response to the pandemic and the way creating learning and teaching changed in these extreme conditions. Going online has been hard and stressful. Yet from the emergency manoeuvres from face-to-face to online, blended, and hybrid modes of learning and teaching, we have learnt that there are advantages too. As Gilles Deleuze (1994) notes: "Learning always results from encounters with unforeseen problems that shock us from our habitual thinking and force us to think new thoughts: [and] propels us into a hitherto unknown and unheard-of world of problems" (p. 192). We would argue that our encounters with the recent pandemic have created problems yet there are also opportunities for more inclusive learning that until now may have been seen by some in creative education as deficit models in the way we teach creative subjects like design. As Maha Bali (2014) argues, co-constructed curricula can help with creating communities of learning that are democratic and more inclusive.

> [There] is a tendency to think of ways of approximating [teachers'] … face-to-face teaching into an online format as much as possible — instead of considering the possibilities afforded by the new medium, with the diverse opportunities for engagement and communication (para. 5).

As higher education institutions adjusted to the pandemic-driven ways of working, our students highlighted the learning communities disconnect and questioned what learning was and how it was offered. We have found over the past year (2020/21) that there is an even greater need to learn with our students rather than just 'do' forms of transmissive teaching still appearing in some parts of design education. We recognise that to move forward to a co-produced and co-constructed curriculum requires help with creating communities of learning that nurture connections, discoveries, and exchange.

The pandemic-shaped learning environments highlighted how some of our students struggled with the way design is taught at university. Both independent learning and group work was not enjoyed by the students. Students struggled with working together to the point of avoidance resulting in learning experiences that did not offer fruitful engagement. We wanted to find ways for students to feel comfortable with each other and help each other learn when at university or when doing work independently. Cathrine Filstad's (2011) research has been useful in highlighting the importance of participation in understanding how we learn, demonstrating:

> Learning as participation must be considered superior when facilitating newcomers learning processes. That means that informal learning arenas must be highlighted as most important together with a necessary awareness of established peers as vital knowledge sources in the transformation from educational knowledge to learning and knowing (p. 11).

The clarity and urgency of the pedagogical debates appearing in response to the pandemic prompted us to review and reflect upon how a community of learners emerges in the art and design institution where we teach. We began to develop interventions by which we could help these communities to come together more swiftly and productively.

3. Laboratories of Learning: Learning to Learn

The student feedback our institution gathered (pulse surveys, unit surveys, yearly surveys and course committees) since March 2020, highlighted how much students valued coming together in communities of practice and what opportunities and barriers they faced during pandemic-shaped learning environments. In analysing these findings, we observed how students would come together based on shared disciplinary knowledge, interests or skillsets. From these observations, we wanted to know whether students could form communities of learning, where the focus goes beyond the subject and prompts students to reflect on what do they understand learning is, when learning takes place, how do they learn and importantly how do they know they are learning (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

3.1 Research process

In response to our question *how we can co-create active participatory places where we all can learn to learn;* we devised a study to gain insights into the following:

1. What conditions would prompt students to talk about learning as a practice beyond subject knowledge?
2. What conditions would be needed for students to want to share with others insights about learning?
3. What conditions would be needed to create student communities of learning?

To respond meaningfully to this study, we drew on participatory action research (PAR). Reason and Bradbury (2001) define it as "… a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes" (p. 1). Cunningham (2008) observes that PAR "… gives us an iterative, systematic, analytic way to reflect on what we are doing in class, to evaluate our success at achieving our classroom goals, and to chart the direction of future classroom strategies based on what we have learned" (p. 1). It is an appropriate methodological choice as the investigation focuses on solving a practical problem, namely facilitating students process of learning about how they learn to develop communities of learning practice, whilst challenging some of the pedagogical cannons. Moreover, the research design relies on the students as key participants to

become co-creators of the research process in shaping the 'Laboratories of Learning'. This reflects a key feature of PAR where its participants become co-owners of the research process to stimulate inquiry into learning practices and the assimilation of research findings into a wider design pedagogy (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Our research design consists of three stages illustrated in Figure 1. The focus of each stage is as follows:

1. Small focus group to establish what would prompt students to talk about learning,
2. Co-designing with students sessions to facilitate cross-disciplinary student groups to come together and talk about how they learn,
3. Students delivering these Learning to Learn sessions as seedlings of the communities of learning practice.
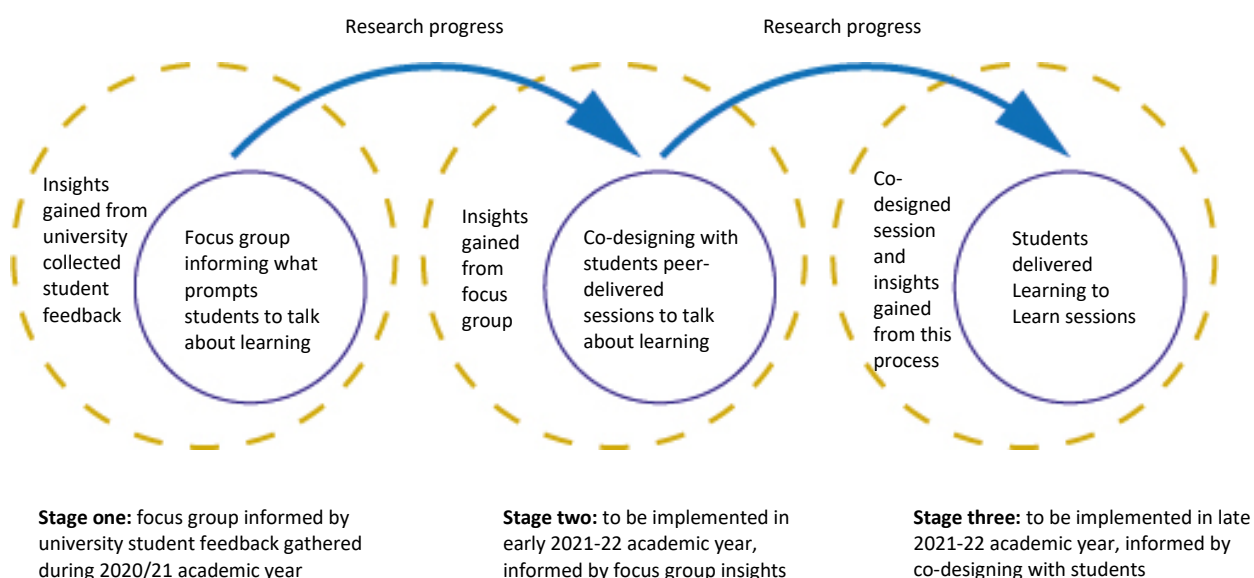

Stage one: focus group informed by university student feedback gathered during 2020/21 academic year

Stage two: to be implemented in early 2021-22 academic year, informed by focus group insights

Stage three: to be implemented in late 2021-22 academic year, informed by co-designing with students

Figure1. The diagram represents the three stages of the research design, highlighting the progress of the study to date and the relationship between each stage.

As we evaluate each stage in consultation with our student co-designers, the insights are used to inform the design of the next stage. This reflects "... a spiral [of] self-contained cycles of planning, acting and observing, and reflecting" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 595), which in general aligns with action research methodologies, PAR being one of them. We also recognise that the co-design nature and peer-to-peer sessions facilitate opportunities for change for student participants, student co-designers as well as ourselves as tutors, which is another feature of PAR. (Ball, 2009 and Singh, 2008). Whilst we also acknowledge the limitations of the study in this explorative stage and the impact this has on meaningfully triangulating our data.

3.2 Insights from the focus group

To identify what conditions would prompt students to discuss learning as a practice that goes beyond the functional need to understand their subject, we conducted a focus group. We drew on Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz (2014) who argue: "By transforming learning into an engaging, interesting and enjoyable activity for both students and professors they increase the learning capacity of all students and the teaching ability of all professors". We used the lessons learned from recent online teaching, to format the focus group. To secure participants we invited student reps to participate or recommend their peers, which resulted in current and recently graduated students

across different design disciplines taking part. At this exploratory stage of the project, the participants were not adjusted for gender or background as the focus has been on the diversity of design disciplines. The session took place online, where we discussed with the participants using an open-ended question format. The purpose was to identify the markers to develop an understanding of the conditions needed to bring students together to talk about learning. The discussion was captured via live note-taking.

The participants shared several insights from highlighting that learning "is not always spoken about" (Focus group 1, February 2021) to recognising that "collaboration is what you get out of it" (Focus group 1, February 2021). Participants also noted that in the current blended learning approach where often learning takes place remotely, it can be hard especially for first-year students to "talk to each other" and create friendship groups. Thus, sessions about learning, participants believed, could enable "speaking to each other … and start collaborating beyond the subject area" (Focus group 1, February 2021). Expanding on this idea of building friendships, participants have also referred to the need for confidence building, as they observed: "talking to people [leads] to building confidence between students because they are more familiar and [they] ventured out" (Focus group 1, February 2021). What we particularly found encouraging in these discussions was how participants reflected upon how talking about learning can become a vehicle for coming together into a community of learning practice which in turn can build up students' confidence. As noted, "… you feel more connected and thus confidence has built up" (Focus group 1, February 2021).

On reflection, we recognised how in particular in the blended learning environment there is a need for 'safe harbours' of community and clearly, there is a need to seek out means by which some of the disciplinary boundaries can be transcended to enable students to connect. The focus group has also illuminated that there is a gap in the way students perceive their learning about learning and the value that understanding one's learning can have in building confidence in developing design practice. This echoed research by Jan D. Vermunt & Vincent Douche (2017) who concluded:

> Students who learn in a meaning-directed way adopt a deep approach to learning: they try to understand the meaning of what they learn, try to discover relations between separate facts or views, structure the learning material into a larger whole, and try to critically engage to what they learn (para. 10).

We identified three key insights from the evaluation of the focus group:

1. Students often do not centre on learning as a practice but as a means to achieve disciplinary subject knowledge.
2. Students would like to gain more insight/confidence in understanding when they learn [best].
3. Students saw themselves as a larger community of learners not so much bound by disciplinary boundaries far more than tutors recognise.

To respond to these insights and move our study to stage two, we have devised a workshop that should enable both students and staff to co-design Learning to Learn sessions to be delivered by students as a peer-to-peer experience. We see these as the core seeds of the 'Laboratories of Learning'.

3.3 Workshop format to co-design 'Learning to Learn' sessions

Stage two of this explorative study is delivering sessions, where the objective is to arrive at a list of activities that students, co-designing with us, could take forward and deliver in a peer-to-peer format as 'Learning to Learn' sessions.

Being cognisant of insights drawn from the first stage (student feedback obtained by the university and the focus group), the co-design workshop would benefit from a blended learning format. Thus, it combines an online pre-task involving participants input into the Miro board to capture a process of mapping in response to three areas of interest: learning definitions; awareness of learning and influencers of learning.

The pre-task would also prompt participants to connect with others to inquire how do they know when they are learning. Such inquiry would act as a cultural probe to position participants' experiences and understanding of their learning in a larger social and cultural context.

The pre-task would be followed by activities in a physical space such as a design studio allowing for more embodied sensemaking and processing of the collected data. The activities would focus on the participants sharing in the first instance their pre-task data followed by process of interrogation of this data through three lenses: what is a shared understanding of how learning happens; what markers could be identified that point to awareness of moments of learning; and what activities emerge as prompts for this learning awareness.

Following the co-designing process of 'Learning to Learn' sessions, the student co-designers would deliver these amongst their peers. After few such peer-to-peer sessions, the participants of the co-design workshop would regroup to undertake an evaluation of the impact of the 'Learning to Learn' sessions in creating communities of learning practice. For the 'Laboratories for Learning' to emerge, the peer-to-peer sessions need to lead to communities of learning practices, which is why evaluating the impact of these sessions is needed to adjust activities where necessary and to ensure that the experiences continue to be meaningful (Sufi, et al, 2018).

As we co-design with students the 'Learning to Learn' sessions we are particularly committed to shaping together new forms of learning experiences. However, we are also cognisant that many of our students wish to return to some form of 'normal', which is why the co-design process and peer-to-peer delivery of the sessions are crucial in shaping the findings of the study to capture the diversity of voices. By consciously moving away from the assumptions on how our students learn, we aim to create a shared means of discovery through the 'Learning to Learn' sessions. We see this very much in line with how Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2013) describe new forms of peer-to-peer learning arguing that

> … people learn through their interaction and participation with one another in fluid relationships that are the result of shared interests and opportunity … participants all stand on equal ground [and in] constant interaction among group members, with their varying skills and talents, functions as a kind of peer amplifier, providing numerous outlets, resources, and aids to further an individual's learning (para. 4).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than ever our students have expressed to us the need for coming together and building connections with each other and teaching staff beyond an exchange of expertise. The early scoping in our study has highlighted that focus on how we all learn can connect us across disciplines and other social or cultural boundaries. However, we argue that there is a need to implement a more explicit process to keep these connections more permanent. Drawing on the value that learning by doing brings, our proposed 'Laboratories for Learning' enact learning experiences that students are familiar with from their day-to-day interactions. However, implementing co-design becomes crucial in identifying what the elements of 'doing' should be. This ensures that the activities are not fixed entities but rather fluid, experimental, and transforming spaces that prompt dialogue and exchange.

Conclusions

This research articulates the value of learning 'how to learn' in a creative higher education institution supported by co-creation and student-centred collaborative methods. By asking the question, *how can we co-create active participatory places where we all can learn to learn?* we aim to create a process by which a set of spaces that we call 'Laboratories of Learning' can come to fruition as useful places for students to explore their and their peers' learning. Using PAR methodology, we aim to understand more fully the preconceptions of the students' ideas about learning. Together we will then be able to construct spaces that are eventful, caring, and daring that help students on their journey through their art and design studies.

As we began to make sense from these learning and teaching experiences driven by the response to the pandemic some of the responses surprise us and some have been around for a while but previously might have been looked upon with suspicion. From this research we believe asking how we can co-create active participatory places where we all can learn to learn, is even more important now to enable us to take advantage of the shifts and the fluidity of the boundaries that the response to the pandemic has generated within higher education.

Fundamentally, the current experiences also highlight how important 'safe harbours' spaces are for our students in times of crisis. We argue in this paper, the key to the emerging opportunities is a responsibility to collectively create new participatory learning spaces not for our students, but with them. Our contribution throughout this paper is to make learning how to learn, central to design students' lives. By foregrounding the metacognitive aspects of thinking about learning we aim to create spaces where learning can co-evolve and be fruitful. Our 'Laboratories of Learning', we believe will facilitate learning as a process of collaboration, dialogue and construction, where both staff and students can as the fundamental question of how do they learn. We argue that this approach can create these safe and daring spaces where questioning can become fruitful, which will become the 'Safe Harbours', where thinking about the process of learning can be tested and experimented with, so students can flourish in the choppy waters of the worlds of design.

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