

The Architecture of Online Classrooms

The online classroom, with its emphasis on intangible concepts and symbols, opens up unseen relationships between time, knowledge, culture, and society in determining a student's identity.

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Accepting the compromise of online classrooms, webinars and virtual meets—an increase seen over the past year—as the reality of the foreseeable future, various digital platforms have simulated the physical classroom in such a way that both teacher and student can perform almost all the activities that they would otherwise carry out in a physical space. Teachers have been used to physical teaching-learning spaces like universities and classrooms since the beginning of civilisation. Despite the proliferation of the internet in the late 1990s, the online classroom has, at best, been tolerated—always subordinate to the real classroom experience. Our obsession with and preference for the physical space is so deep that it has elbowed out all possibilities of even envisioning alternate learning spaces. Luckily, the current global crisis gives us an opportunity to rethink and redefine the fundamentals of what may be considered a learning space, and conduct a rigorous inquiry into the forms of space that can offer themselves as alternatives.

In his seminal work *The Production of Space* (1974), Henri Lefebvre presents three types of space: perceived space, conceived space, and lived space, together called the spatial triad. These are that which is seen (real space, as seen, generated and used by us), that which is thought (ideas, concepts, abstractions—the space of planners and thinkers), and that which is felt (space that is experienced, lived as a result of social relations). So far, we have been largely preoccupied with considering only perceived space as the space for learning, giving it the form of classrooms, libraries, common rooms and playgrounds. Lefebvre's contention is that perceived or visible spaces facilitate the performance of routine activities and ensure a minimum level of competence. These spaces are structured and laid out in such a way that they connect places of work to spaces of leisure and residence. They are a reflection of the contemporary economic and social order, even if it is not easily visible. Perceived spaces surround us all the time

and in the process occupy all our senses, becoming so overwhelming that they prevent the conceptualisation and consequent formation of alternate spaces of learning.

Conceived spaces, like the “space” of physics, architecture or geometry, or lived spaces, such as the symbolic spaces of religion and society, are relegated to textbooks. But, given the somewhat locked down lives that we are being forced to live today, these spaces—conceived and lived—are finally making their way back into our minds, as physical (perceived) space recedes from our consciousness, even if only a bit. It also gives institutions an opportunity to construct new learning spaces that by themselves act as agents of learning. Conceived spaces are conceptually rich as they fuse form and meaning, like the architectural drawings of a building or a city park constructed on the theme of naturalness.

Lived spaces, on the other hand, draw upon symbols that embody the social and religious experience of humanity—like the images associated with god and divinity. The intimate space of a house or the spatial layout of a religious symbol like the om or the cross exercise enormous influence on the minds of a believer. They might be comparatively abstract and a little difficult to grasp but could offer fertile ground for developing new methods of teaching, learning and understanding, if incorporated into the new architecture of the classroom.

These two new spaces of learning, conceived and lived, are less constrained by physicality, and will accord greater freedom to think originally and confer meaning to one’s experience without referring to established canons of understanding and articulating experience. In space that is facilitated by technology, experience assumes a new texture. What constitutes an experience in an online classroom? A device mediates the images and the sounds that a student encounters. The interactions are reduced to sound and light that are mere appearances—both illusory and superficial. A thinking mind may find it inadequate and pine for a deeper engagement. The alternatives provided by Lefebvre through conceived and lived spaces are concepts and symbols and expect a deeper engagement for understanding. If students were to inch towards internalising them, it could lead to a simultaneous stretching of both cognitive and affective potential.

An online classroom largely comprises technologically facilitated interactions between images. The screen does not require much movement while the space in a physical classroom dynamically expands and contracts offering possibilities of intimacy and movement. Learning through the screen therefore confers upon students the freedom to pretend to attend a class and makes them realise soon that they are responsible for their own learning. This simultaneity of freedom and responsibility in online learning spaces (different from the same duality in a physical setting) attains intensity and indifference at once among different members. It alters the relationship of power between the teacher and the taught. It also underscores the fact that education need not remain prescriptive where one

shows the path and the other follows. As the students find meaning and develop understanding in conceived and lived spaces—spaces that are a product of their own mind—the capacities of the mind expand, new layers are discovered within, and a new architecture of the mind takes shape.

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This autonomy will encourage students to draw on their own resources of thoughts and feelings to construct understanding. As these spaces challenge the primacy of physical spaces, they reify thinking and feeling—the invisible, intangible human activities. They nudge the student into a territory less familiar, compel them to think through dense conceptual entities, at the same time encouraging them to experience the visceral nature of symbols. By disrupting the monotony of overfamiliar spaces and settings, they make thinking a little more edgy and gently encourage our mind to push its limits.

Of course, the question of the operationalisation of such spaces remains. Lefebvre integrates the spatial triad in the (now largely accepted) hypothesis that (social) space is a (social) product. The online classroom is also a social space that is produced through not only conventional means of production like land, labour, capital and enterprise, but also invisible factors like the reproductive relationship between genders, the power structures present in society, etc. The online classroom with its emphasis on concepts and symbols, both arising from and built upon the collective human experience of several millennia, opens up hitherto unseen relationships between time, knowledge, culture, religion and society to determine a student’s identity. As the student is able to make these connections, they emerge as a historical being and their life suddenly finds new structures on which they can lay themselves bare. New spaces laid out along new structures may enable their personalities to burst out of themselves.

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LAST LINES

