

InnovaEDU network
Learn to Tea(ch) series

Uppsala seminar: “Navigating Learning Spaces”
Uppsala

Summary of good teaching practices

Introduction

An overarching goal of the seminar was to affirm the choice and design of learning spaces as the result of *pedagogical* considerations. We also wished to emphasise the importance of paying serious attention to, and care for, those learning spaces where students work independently, without any teacher presence. Finally, the seminar aimed at providing concrete advice for carrying out different types of TLAs (teaching and learning activities) in various types of physical settings, and for the development of new learning spaces.

The ongoing pandemic left a clear imprint on the actual seminar. Apart from the fact that it had to be conducted online, instead of in Uppsala, the challenges presented by hybrid teaching, where some students are present in a physical room while others participate online, figured prominently in the discussions, and were also discussed at the Aarhus meeting.

During the small group discussions, participants exchanged ideas and suggestions for handling and overcoming challenges that they had faced in their teaching practice. From the general discussions, the following general themes emerged as particularly salient.

Flexible spaces for learning

Students gain from engaging in activities that require them to apply previously acquired knowledge in order to solve problems and analyse complex contexts. In the process, they also need to locate and evaluate relevant materials and research, and should be given the opportunity to share the results of their work, and receive feedback from peers and teachers. In order to allow teachers from many different disciplines to design a wide variety of such activities, ***flexibility***, and not technology *per se*, is the key thing for new learning spaces.

- **Flexible space:** teachers and students should be able to re-configure their learning spaces. Rooms should have moveable furniture, allowing students to group and re-group easily during the span of a learning activity. Flexibility extends to other aspects of the room, too: walls could be used as whiteboards, power outlets should be everywhere, microphones and speakers should permit easy communication etc.
- **Flexible technology:** there will always be rooms with very specific technology for very specific purposes, and rooms with very little in the way of technology, but flexible learning spaces should open up for many more different scenarios: they should lend themselves to BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) scenarios, where student laptops and mobiles carry the work forward, but should also provide technology that support the joint creation and presentation of the results of group work. Generic technology, that is open to many different uses in many different contexts, is generally to be preferred over more narrow solutions.
- **Flexible access:** *teachers* should be able to include room flexibility as one factor when they book rooms for a course, and not only the number of seats and basic technology. *Students*

need generous access to group rooms and well-designed spaces for individual and collective work, and should not be met by locked doors and an uninviting study environment.

Getting the teachers on board

Many advanced learning spaces find themselves empty, and their technology is all too often severely under-used. How can we lower the threshold?

- **Promoting the added worth:** teachers need to know why they should bring their students to a particular room, and try out new ways of teaching. The best way is to have them talk to other teachers, and to have them listen to student voices from other courses.
- **Technical support** that is quickly available, efficient and patient.
- **Pedagogical support** that grows out of a dialogue with the teachers and a real interest in their teaching, and which helps them to integrate experimental teaching in their courses
- **Institutional support** that recognizes and values pedagogical innovation

Getting the students on board

It has often been observed that many students tend to look with some suspicion on innovative ways of teaching. Some teachers may meet with expressions of discontent and resistance from students that still see the old-fashioned lecture as the “real” form of teaching. How can we bring them along?

- **Communicate and explain your plan:** as a teacher, you should have a good idea why you have chosen to teach in a certain way on a certain occasion. There is no need to keep this a secret: share it with the students!
- **Make it worthwhile:** if you raise the expectations of students by bringing them to new spaces and by giving them access to resources and tools that are quite new to them, their tasks should really require them to use them. Otherwise, it may appear as technological overkill.
- **Give the students control:** it is much more important that the students use the technology, than that the teachers use it.
- **Provide appropriate scaffolding:** any activities should be well integrated in the course structure, and be aligned with other activities.
- **Evaluate and collaborate:** evaluate what has been done – and consider planning it together with the students!

Developing new learning spaces

All too often, new and expensive learning spaces and technology seem to give a poor return on investment. They may fail for different reasons, but problems can often be traced back to the planning process.

- **Include all stakeholders from the outset:** teachers and departments, property management, local support staff, students. All should be involved in the project.
- **Establish standard solutions:** unavoidably, there will be a variety of technical solutions, but it is a good idea to strive for some degree of standardization. Teachers, as well as students will, e.g., be pleased to recognize a standard set of controls in different rooms; support staff can provide better support when they have fewer systems and solutions to care for; fewer systems are likely to be easier and less expensive to buy, update and replace.