

Where is the New Blended Learning?

Where is the new blended learning? Looking back ten years we see an image of the future (today) as envisaged from the past. Much of that vision has been realised in both physical and virtual space. This talk will look briefly at the changing context of the institution: physical as well as organisational and then argue that through a new understanding of blended learning, beyond the polarities of physical and virtual, we may reclaim space for transformational learning. People will only ever partially inhabit any space and they will always occupy it to some extent on their own terms.

Now, space is as much about people as it is about their built and natural environment. An area in which change has been very evident is in the blending of the once largely distinct domains of “learning” and “socialising” and in the foregrounding of the transactional component of learning. Another place sees the disruption of a fundamental concept in computing: that hardware, operating systems, applications and data should be rigorously demarcated. This space has collapsed under the influence of apps, and the virtualisation of computing infrastructures (the “cloud”). Through these changes, the physical location of staff not engaged in face-to-face transactional services becomes fluid, their accommodation a problem.

Learning is increasingly taking place outside institutional spaces. Learners create their own learning environment outside, inside and in-despite of the intentions of others.. Physical spaces as a central element of learning appear ever more fluid, polyvalent spaces between. Our new conception of blended learning is located in an in-between space, which does not privilege the virtual or the physical, the didactic or the dialogic, the classroom or the forum, the private or the social. Such blended space is where learning through activity occurs, and reflection on – and dialogue about – authentic experience happens. This is the space of both community and identity where all participants, institution, teacher and student, are co-constructors of the space itself and of the learning that occurs within it. Learning that happens in that space, to be transformational, must have the confidence to travel in company through liminal areas of disorientation and uncertainty: a threshold between where we are and where we will be.