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## Technology and the dis-placing of learning in educational futures

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## ABSTRACT

Common visions of online education entail radically re-configuring the experience of learning: a technological displacement from the spatial order of classrooms into the more diffuse arena of digital networks. One assumption seems to be that the very spatial order of classrooms creates an undesirably rigid sense of place for schooling, one that is depressingly impervious to change; and that the attendant solution is to escape the realm of the 'physical' altogether – into an online realm more supportive of collaboration and free of face-the-front conventions. In the present paper we seek to challenge this oppositional view. We consider several ways in which digital technology can restructure the traditional spaces of educational practice, and identify design dynamics that may be neglected in the wake of 'virtualisation'. Discussion first highlights two theoretical perspectives that will inform many such designs: namely, situativity and sociality in learning. Three examples are then provided of how digital technology can intersect with learning space design to create novel interpersonal frameworks for learning and to destabilise conventional senses of 'place' in those settings. The examples concern, respectively, the organisation of collaborative, expository, and community-based social structures for learning. Those examples represent an illustrative counterpoint to models of online schooling and illustrate a potentially productive synergy between the opportunities afforded by digital technologies, the desires of those who wish to dis-place learning online, and a well-established interest in learning space design.

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## 1. Introduction

There have always been voices of discontent surrounding the institutions of schooling. It is certainly right that designs for education should face critical attention. Yet here and there such critique has bubbled up to question the very fabric or existence of the school as we have come to understand it (Bowles & Ginitis, 1976; Freire, 1986; Illich, 1971; Reimer, 1971; Shantz, 2012). Currently, such radical critics are being offered one possible basis for an alternative future. Digital networking is increasingly considered an intriguing means of transforming the experience of education: doing so by making possible a "global learning infrastructure" (Heterick, Mingle, & Twigg, 1998). To be clear, enthusiasts of technology in learning have hardly needed to wait for the advent of the web to advocate subverting traditional schooling by embedding it into wider structures – viewed as more 'authentic' due to their connections to practices happening outside educational institutions. Witness the twentieth century 'teaching machines' of Pressey and of Skinner, and the programmed instruction of the latter, where the stated intention is to disrupt

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'primitive' relations between the teachers and the taught: this as part of an educational "industrial revolution" to involve bringing learners into direct personal contact with external creators of societal content (Benjamin, 1988). Or consider the 'learning machine' initiatives of Papert and colleagues that sought inspiration from more informal kinds of cultural activity and perhaps to remove learners from school venues altogether (find more discussion of relations between 'formal' and 'informal' in Crook & Lewthwaite, 2010). Yet the present paper notes how, in contrast to those earlier visions, online learning has actually increasingly flourished, not least because its designers have deftly appropriated a modern perspective on learning, one that conceives it in strongly 'social' terms that seem to intuitively dovetail with some of those wider critiques of the educational theorists we mentioned above. By way of contrast, in the present paper we consider here how the sociality *within* more conventional classrooms might be similarly transformed, through a parallel coordination of technology and space – while noting the limited extent to which this possibility has been pursued.

Stripped to essentials, the most familiar patterns for schooling involve a curriculum to be experienced at a particular time (stereotypically: 'early life'), located in distinctive sorts of places ('schools'), and orchestrated through a particular social dynamic ('teaching'). Moreover, in contrast to informal instruction, this curricular instruction often manifests long term goals (such as induction to literacy and numeracy practices) in which are constructed cognitive and interpersonal skills that seemingly have no 'natural' grounding in everyday life.

As we shall discuss further below, the very familiarity of those conventional structures can be taken to indicate a shared educational culture, but also to hint at the immutability of that culture. Learning online, on the other hand, is seen as disturbing all of these structures. Episodes of social engagement are more typically asynchronous, participation is less spatially prescribed, and the interactions of learning are more often student-led (Katz & Oblinger, 2000; Searson, Monty Jones, & Wold, 2011). As critical scholars, and perhaps as individuals grounded in a more conventional educational culture, if the abrupt transformations of education that such designs promise do not leave us incredulous, they may well leave us uncomfortable. However, the purpose of the present paper is not to question the credibility, or even the desirability, of this prominent 'dis-placing' of educational practice (cf. Jandrić, 2014). Its purpose is more one of constructing a counterpoint to such a possible future. Our concern around this matter hinges on the general question of how technology re-mediate the management of place and social interaction, even within those more traditional educational contexts where the implications have received less attention.

One particularly compelling consequence of full-strength online learning is that technology brings about significant shifts in the social relationships of learning; one way in which it does so is by radically dis-placing those relationships – undermining the familiar spatial context. So we consider here how contemporary technologies can mediate fresh social interactions by similarly re-configuring the spatial structures within the more conventional, or traditional, sites of teaching and learning. We wish to notice emerging opportunities to destabilise the 'traditional', thereby positioning those traditional settings of education as complementary of online modes rather than in jealous and conservative opposition. Moreover, we suggest that these neglected design possibilities offer valuable opportunities for enriching future educational practice in school settings.

In the first section below, we highlight those forms of educational critique that often serve to attract interest towards the potential of online learning as a format for future education. The prospect is set against two theoretical frameworks for understanding human cognition and learning: situativity and sociality. We then furnish some case illustrations, drawing heavily on our own work, so as to indicate how it is not only within online education that technology can re-configure spaces to influence learning relationships: technology can also shape productive interaction in conventional classrooms through the way in which it is integrated with spatial design.

## 2. Temptations to embrace a virtual schooling

Learning is an inevitable and ongoing human process. While it may be difficult to inhibit or precisely control, learning may be readily intensified, motivated and directed towards predetermined goals or values. That is, human cultures have evolved interactions organised such that learning is the explicit purpose: strongly driven by intentionality, and typically disconnected from the learner's immediate needs. 'Education' connotes the cultural practice that has emerged to manage such activity. 'Schools' are then the dominant places for this education to happen. 'Study' is what ostensibly gets done in those places: namely, the engagement of deliberate learning.

Here is a simple exercise: enter the term 'studying' into a search engine but request the output as 'images'. The result will suggest the following themes: boredom and stress, a socially isolated practice, an expository engagement (mainly with books), and activity anchored to sites specialised for the exclusive purpose of formal learning (e.g., libraries, personal 'studies', and classrooms). For sure, the search engine montage is an imperfect way of diagnosing the state of some cultural practice. Yet these visual associations resonate with a modern unease. They certainly encourage critically evaluating the learner-appeal of our educational designs.

Many educational theorists have long shared this unease (Claxton, 2013; Gee, 2004; Warmington, 2015) but the attendant dissatisfaction has recently extended into more open arenas of educational debate (e.g., Putnam, 2015; Robinson, 2006). This more popular concern is not only with the apparent lack of engagement or enthusiasm among many students; it also questions the very nature of the output – schooled knowing and schooled knowledge. One key strand of disquiet regarding knowledge acquired at school is its apparent lack of versatility. Once beyond the classroom, it is often found to be "inert" (Whitehead, 1929): that is, not applicable to life in some wider world, or not readily mobilised to be exercised there. Put another way, it has not been made sufficiently 'relevant'. The common route for those expressing such concerns is towards advocating educational practices that are more connected to, or embedded within, the wider cultural or economic world. Some variants of this critique dwell upon particular visions of the wider world, invoking a dissonance between what is achieved in school and the particular demands of modern

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