

Creating spaces for engagement in meaningful activities

ELINA MASLO* 

University College Copenhagen (KP), Denmark

THEMATIC ARTICLE

Received: July 7, 2021 • Accepted: November 16, 2021

Published online: June 6, 2022

© 2021 The Author(s)



ABSTRACT

Adults learn when they actively engage in meaningful activities. Meaningfulness is an extremely subjective factor, which depends on experiences, values, attitudes and much more. “The ways in which adults learn in and through the workplace are rooted in educational trajectories and their complex intertwining with social institutions (of labour market, workplace, community) and social roles (of employee, citizen, family member) at different stages of the life-course” (Kersh et al., 2011, 355). The interplay between work, studies and lifeworld is the focus of this study, conducted at the University College Copenhagen in 2020–2021. At the College, and in teacher training in particular, we are asking two important questions these days: How can we establish an engaging learning culture in our educational program? How can we create space for all students to find the relevant content to engage with? How can this be done when our students are so diverse according to age, life and work experiences, life situation and life interests? In this article, I analyse my own workplace learning and professional development during my first 2 years at University College, where I have been working on transforming my experience from the university to a new context – a professional teacher education program at University College.

KEYWORDS

professional education, teacher education, teacher training, workplace learning, learning space

* Corresponding author. E-mail: elina.maslo@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, at my workplace, I was given a special assignment: to teach one of the compulsory subjects to student teachers. I remember the question my colleagues asked me at the job interview: *'How will you deal with the challenge of the fact that students do not choose for themselves the subject that you will be teaching? That you are going to teach a compulsory course?'* As an experienced teacher, I was quick to answer: *'I will create a learning space where students will become curious about the problems they find meaningful. I will develop tasks and processes for the students to create space for their engagement in studies'*. Awareness (and curiosity), autonomy and authenticity – the three categories described in this article – have always been included in my answers to questions about students' engagement in study activities. I would say today – 2 years later – I succeeded to some degree. There have been many moments when students were fully engaged and found working on the course activities meaningful. What was difficult was to maintain the engagement throughout the whole course. In this article, I analyse my own workplace learning and professional development during my first 2 years at University College Copenhagen, where I have been working on transforming my experience from the university to a new context – a professional teacher education programme at University College.

Humans learn – and enjoy learning – when they have an opportunity to engage actively in meaningful activities. *How can we establish an engaging learning culture on our programme? How can we create space for all students to find the relevant content to engage with? How can this be done when our students are so diverse in age, life and work experiences, life situation and life interests?* These three questions were asked during the development of a new blended learning course at University College Copenhagen on *Danish as a Second Language in School Subjects*. Taking account of these three questions and applying an ecological sociocultural approach to language and learning, a model was developed and applied in autumn 2019 – spring 2021 in order to establish more engaging learning culture on this course.

In this article, I present the model that I have developed and tested in my teaching at University College Copenhagen. After a short introduction to the context of the study, I describe the theoretical background of the model. I then present the model and the three core components integrated in the model, and explain how the model has been used in my teaching. Four different didactic designs have been implemented and analysed in my teaching in the past 2 years. I look at those designs through the lens of sociocultural ecological theory and the notion of space. I then discuss the model in relation to the results of this study and zoom in on a very important question, which we need to make more visible in our discussion on teaching and learning: time. I suggest using the term *'rhythm'* in relation to teaching and learning to promote engagement in study activities during the whole course. Finally, I reflect on my workplace learning experiences gained in the transition from my work with postgraduate students in the university context (masters level) to undergraduate students in the university college context (professional degree, bachelor level).

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted on the Teacher Education programme at University College Copenhagen over four semesters (autumn 2019, spring 2020, autumn 2021, spring 2021). To



become a teacher, all student teachers are required to take a course about how to teach plurilingual students, both because there are many plurilingual pupils in Danish schools (ca. 11% on average, a much higher proportion in the Copenhagen area) and because the Danish school identifies itself with the ideal of the student-centred approach—teachers, in their pedagogical practice, are creating a bridge from pupils' already-established experiences from school and everyday life to the content of school subjects (Holmen, 2019). The students need to learn how to establish these kinds of bridge and how to use pupils' experiences (language, culture, learning experiences) in their teaching in school subjects.

The course *Danish as a Second Language in School Subjects* is a very complex course. In a relatively short timeframe (one semester, ca. five months) students learn to understand the role of language in their subjects, how to develop teaching that promotes both learning in the subject and the development of pupils' language, and how to analyse their own teaching from the point of view of language development. This work implies working with knowledge, skills and attitudes. The students learn about language learning theory, theory on the scaffolding of language development, how to analyse their teaching and how to create space for pupils' participation in their teaching by using their language and cultural resources. The last focus especially – that on attitudes – challenges the students. Going from regarding plurilingual students as lacking a language – Danish – to discovering the possibilities of how to use their other languages and cultures as a resource is something that takes time and is difficult to accomplish in such a short timeframe.

In this article I analyse four different didactic designs developed to prepare students to work with pupils learning Danish as a second language in their school subjects. All four didactic designs have been developed on the basis of the model to promote engagement in meaningful activities.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY AND MODEL

Adults learn when they actively engage in meaningful activities. Meaning, and meaningfulness, are extremely subjective factors. How we make sense of our environment depends on a host of subjective parameters, such as perceptions, emotions, attitudes and values, which we develop on the basis of our experience in different contexts we are part of.

This study and the model developed within it draw on the ecological sociocultural approach to learning. From an ecological perspective, the learner is immersed in an environment full of potential meanings. These meanings become available gradually as the learner acts and interacts within and with this environment. 'Learning is not a holus-bolus or piecemeal migration of meanings to the inside of the learner's head, but rather the development of increasingly effective ways of dealing with the world and its meanings' (van Lier, 2000, 246).

From the ecological sociocultural point of view, learning happens in the interaction between people and their environment based on their experiences (van Lier, 1996, 2010). Historical, cultural and symbolic activities provide resources for learning and action: 'activity in a meaningful environment generates affordances for enhancing that activity and subsequent activities' (van Lier, 2004, 80). In this process, a special role is given to our language and dialogue. Language, from an ecological, sociocultural point of view, covers all linguistic and non-linguistic (e.g. semiotic) activities that take place inside people and between people in the physical, social, personal, cultural and historical world they live in (van Lier, 2004). Through language and



language use in meaningful, equal conversations we discover our world, make sense of it, and learn. Language is a meaning-making process that happens between individuals who interact in a particular historical and cultural context – a process where we create, share and exchange meanings between speakers, time and place (van Lier, 2010).

Learning is difficult to study in many ways. Firstly, learning is something we cannot observe; secondly, we all have a different understanding of what learning is, and thirdly, learning is a very abstract phenomenon which can only be studied retrospectively, through reflection (Maslo, 2017, 2021). To enable learning to be studied, a notion of learning spaces has been used in the study. Inspired by current research on learning spaces and the understanding of space as socially constructed and as a product of cultural, social, symbolic, political and economic actions (Brooks et al., 2012), the space metaphor has been used in the study to capture the complex interrelationships between the learner and the environment and to understand the complexity of the factors influencing learning.

Space is understood not as concrete, material object, but also as ideological, lived and subjective (Lefebvre, 1991), ‘constituted and given meaning through human endeavor’ (Singh, Rizvi, & Shrestha, 2007, p. 197), both constituted through social relations and constitutive of them (Lefebvre, 1991). The metaphor of space is used to illustrate the complex interaction between many diverse factors (cognitive, social, emotional etc) in the physical, virtual, historical, emotional, symbolic, cultural worlds we live in. All dimensions interact at the same time and do so differently for different persons in different situations and contexts. For purposes of analysis of the didactic designs in this article, the balanced trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality of Lefebvre, or the unity of time, space and the social as a representation of our lifeworld, have been useful (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 2010).

MODEL FOR CREATING ENGAGEMENT IN MEANINGFUL ACTIVITIES

In this study a didactic model was developed and applied to plan, organise and evaluate study activities. The model works with knowledge, skills and attitudes on multiple levels, providing the space to connect the students’ work, studies and lifeworld. By doing so, an interactional space emerges among three main criteria that together create drive for learning: an interaction between awareness (and curiosity), autonomy and authenticity (van Lier, 1996). To Leo van Lier, **awareness** is about knowing where we are heading in the learning process, getting access to language and having space for using the language, the quality of affordances, scaffolding and being aware of language and language use. When learning new subjects – and courses – you learn a new language. **Autonomy** is about having the possibility to choose, but also taking responsibility for your choices and your own and your co-travellers’ journey. It is about agency, the possibility to do things yourself, to participate in decisions, your knowledge and reflection about learning. **Authenticity** is about engagement and interest, having the possibility to work with meaningful content based on your needs, interests and relevant experiences from your everyday life. All three components are driven by social interaction, a meaningful equal dialogue which must be promoted in the teaching processes.

The model is based on a theoretical analysis of literature about learning and language. As seen in the figure below, on the left side of the model I have collected statements about learning in general, and language learning in particular: 1) we learn when we are able to connect the new



knowledge to that already known; 2) we learn when we can make sense of the environment; 3) we learn when we actively engage in meaningful activities; 4) we learn when we reflect on our experiences (Fig. 1).

For each statement, I have formulated the requirements for a learning space that can promote engagement in learning activities, or pedagogical implications of the statements about learning. If we agree that learning happens when we connect the new knowledge to that we already have, then we need to create space for experiences our students bring with them (experiences with language, culture and learning, and knowledge acquired in contexts other than school). When we know that we can only learn when we are able to make sense of our environment, then the pedagogical implication would be creating qualitative affordances in the teaching. Affordance is defined in the model as a particular property of the environment that is relevant for an active, perceiving participant in this environment and which can be used to make sense of this environment (van Lier, 2004).

For the next statement, that we can learn when we actively engage in meaningful activities, the task in teaching is to create space for active engagement in meaningful activities. Finally, since we know that learning succeeds when we can reflect on our experiences, the teacher’s task is to create space for reflection and discussions about language and learning.

By taking the model to a metalevel and away from the content of the course (themes, tasks, activities, texts, exercises), I created a multidimensional framework for reflection on the concrete content of the course. Every time I need to choose a topic, text or task, I can challenge myself with these four dimensions from the model.

The model is an attempt to illustrate that learning processes are not linear. They are complex, emergent and unpredictable. Using a model that works on a metalevel and includes the spatial dimensions of learning can be useful for creating the space for engagement in meaningful activities for very diverse students and pupils. This model has provided a framework to develop tasks and to plan activities for the students in blended learning spaces in the course analysed in this article – and my own workplace learning and professional development.

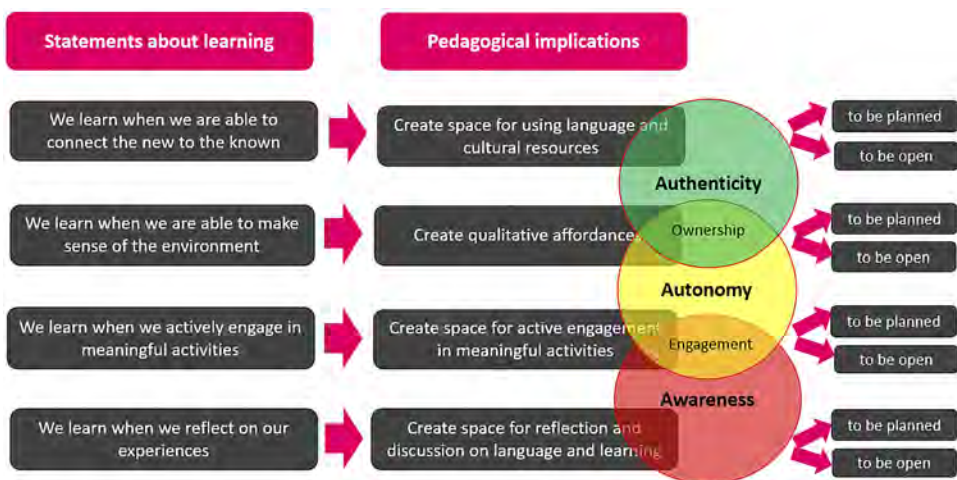


Fig. 1. Model for creating space for engagement in meaningful activities



FOUR DIDACTIC DESIGNS FOR PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT

The model presented was used to plan four different designs in four semesters at University College Copenhagen. Although it was possible to use the model to create four different didactic designs, each of them in its own way created space for engagement with different results. I will now describe these didactic designs and the challenges associated with all four of them (Fig. 2).

Design 1: From theory to practice – planning using themes for discussion

In autumn 2019 – my first semester in teacher education – I planned the course according to my experiences from the university. The most important themes were chosen by me as a teacher; texts on these themes were uploaded, read by the students and discussed on the course. During this semester, I focused on creating space for students' critical approach to the themes of the course, as well as space for sharing their own experiences with languages. The logic of the course was to go from theory to practice, ending up with better skills with which to analyse practice. The course consisted of lots of reading, reflections on theory and practice and work on attitudes to plurilingual students. However, the exam papers were not concrete enough to allow analysis of the language in the school subject chosen. An additional challenge was that many students did not themselves have experience of teaching, which made it difficult to connect theory to practice.

Design 2: The necessary competences – understand the need for the course

In my second semester in teacher education, I focused on students' understanding of the need for the course. Together with the students, we developed a framework of knowledge, skills and attitudes a teacher needs to have in order to be able to work with plurilingual pupils in school



Fig. 2. Four didactic designs for the course *Danish as a Second Language in School Subjects*



subjects. The experienced student teachers, who had nearly finished their studies, reflected upon the competences they lacked for solving the task. This process identified the competencies to be worked on during the semester, which was then planned accordingly. Although students chose the themes themselves, their engagement vanished during the course.

Design 3: Problem-based approach – autonomy in choosing the focus and the texts

In the third design, I was inspired by a problem-based approach, or students as researchers. Knowing that the students were almost finished with their teacher education, I provided the possibility for the students to choose the focus of the module for themselves, according to their professional and personal interests. Scaffolded by specially developed problem-based tasks and a variety of literature relevant to the various themes of the course, students were invited to work on analysis of the practical problems that were meaningful for them. This kind of work was difficult for some of the students and required lots of scaffolding from the course teacher.

Design 4: From practice to theory through analysis

In the last design, I chose to take account of students' practice, but in a much more concrete way than in design 3. All students were invited to work on a concrete teaching unit developed by themselves or chosen by themselves from already existing teaching materials. The main idea of this semester was to create the need to engage in study activities through tasks that required knowledge and skills from this course. Tasks were developed to create space for immersion in the course themes. All the work in this course ended up in the exam paper. One of the students reported in his evaluation of design 4 that working with the same empirical material during the whole course and in the examination created the space for his engagement. Normally, he would wait until the examination to read the course material. On this course, he read for every session, because all the work he did during the course could be used in the exam.

In all four semesters, I encountered students who engaged in the course activities. There was also a section of the students who did not. In my analysis of the didactic designs and also of the feedback from the students, I could not find a logical explanation as to why there was this group of students whom I could not engage in any of my didactic designs. Then I began to think about time!

DISCUSSION: WE TAKE TIME FOR GRANTED

When analysing the didactic designs from the space perspective and looking at the spatial characteristics of the learning spaces created in these designs, I realised that both my colleagues and I take time for granted. If we take account of the fact that the unity of time, space and the social is the representation of our lifeworld (Lefebvre, 1991), then all three dimensions must be present in the learning spaces. Some of the students who did not engage in the course simply did not take time for studying at all. Without time, there cannot be learning. As simple as that.

But there is more. When we speak about learning spaces and their complexity, we cannot simplify the notion of time understood chronologically as a timeline from one point to another. In my reflections on this study, I came across the work of Doreen Massey. In her book *For Space*,



she describes three propositions about space: 1) space is a product of interrelations; 2) these interrelations are multiple, diverse and unpredictable; 3) space is always under construction, always open (Massey, 2005). This means that space itself emerges when we interact with each other and our environments, when we make sense of our environments and engage. All these processes take place in time. We need to look more closely to the interrelations between time, place and the social.

Benjamin Olivares Bøgeskov has studied engagement in the work of nurses. Using Søren Kierkegaard's concepts of time and eternity as a prism (Olivares Bøgeskov, 2019), he created a model that connects time, meaning and usefulness. Looking at time as a chronological line, he places usefulness at the end of the line, somewhere in the future. All students know that it makes sense to engage with study activities to become a good teacher. It is an ethical question which students have reflected on already when choosing the profession. The problem – or challenge – is that meaning, and meaningfulness, are phenomena connected to our present. We simply make sense of our environments in the present moment, not somewhere in the future. We make sense every day when we are engaging with the themes and tasks of a course.

Therefore, we need to focus not only on time understood as a quantity or as a chronological line of events. We also need to focus on the relation of time and place – the rhythms, as Henri Lefebvre formulated it in his book *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (2004). To Lefebvre, rhythms are the continuing interaction between time and place, where there is an action (expenditure of energy) (Lefebvre, 2004, 15). To create a space for engagement, the students need to act, and acting takes time. Therefore, when planning the new courses, I will focus on these actions to create a learning rhythm in the course, still based on the three main criteria in the model – awareness (and curiosity), autonomy and authenticity – but in a more dynamic way. An extra dimension needs to be added to the model to make us aware of the rhythms during the course. An extra task needs to be solved by the teacher: how to create meaningful activities in every piece of the course so as to create a rhythm for engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have presented a model for engaging students in meaningful activities and the four didactic designs based on this model. The first important statement to be made on the basis of my analysis is that we need to speak about time in our education. A simple question about taking time for study, a concrete amount of time, is not to be taken for granted.

When designing the teaching, my focus was on the interactional dimension of the learning space – the exchange of information with the students and the creation of space for equal dialogue in places provided by the institution (physical, virtual, synchronic, asynchronous). However, I took the time dimension for granted, which resulted in students' engagement becoming weaker during the course – especially in the case of those students who needed much scaffolding and framing in their learning processes because of their limited experience of studying.

The second statement made in this article is that we need to speak about time also in the sense of rhythms. Building on the work of Lefebvre and Olivares Bøgeskov, I suggest using the



term ‘*rhythms of engagement*’ to underline that engagement – and meaning – are created in the present moment. To provide more engagement in study activities, we need to have this in mind.

Finally, the 2-year-long process of workplace learning resulted in a much more nuanced view of my own teaching, being forced to develop and transform my practice in the transition from the university context with postgraduate students to the professional educational context with undergraduate students. While being challenged to develop a course which is compulsory for the undergraduate students and being forced to create space for students with limited study and work experience, I was asking questions about very fundamental aspects of my professional actions. An interactional space was created to reflect on my own workplace learning and professional development, making it possible to rethink my teaching in a more dynamic way. While taking the perspective of teacher as worker in college as workplace and considering my own sense-making in the present moment in the learning spaces of teaching, I realised how important it is to see your own teaching as a process which happens together with students in time and place – a dynamic, multiple, and unpredictable process. I will use this experience and understanding of teaching in my professional work to prepare my student teachers for their future professional lives.

REFERENCES

- Brooks, R., Fuller, A., & Waters, J. (Eds.) (2012). *Changing spaces of education: New perspectives on the nature of learning*. London: Routledge.
- Holmen, A. (2019). Sproglig diversitet blandt eleverne i grundskolen – fra problem til potentiale. In A. S. Gregersen (Ed.), *Sprogfag i forandring: Pædagogik og praksis* (3rd ed., Vol. 1, pp. 23–55). Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*. London/New York: Continuum.
- van Lier, L. (1996). *Interaction in the language curriculum: Awareness, autonomy, and authenticity*. London: Longman.
- van Lier, L. (2000). In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *From input to affordance: Social-interactive learning from an ecological perspective* (pp. 245–285). Oxford: Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning.
- van Lier, L. (2004). An ecological-semiotic perspective on language and linguistics. In C. J. Kramsch (Ed.), *Language acquisition and language socialization: Ecological perspectives* (pp. 140–164). London/New York: Continuum.
- van Lier, L. (2010). The ecology of language learning: Practice to theory, theory to practice. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 3, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.07.005>.
- Maslo, E. (2017). ‘I have learned – it is about something that happened in the past!’: Time, space and human interaction in different perceptions of learning at work. In A. Ostendorf & C. K. Permpoon-wiwat (Eds.), *Workplaces as learning spaces – conceptual and empirical insights* (pp. 105–123). Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press.
- Maslo, E. (2021). Studying diverse learning spaces at work together with people who learn and work: Multiple levels of reflection. In M. Malloch, L. Cairns, K. Evans, & B. N. O’Connor (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of learning and work* (pp. 145–157). SAGE.
- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. SAGE Publications.



- Olivares Bøgeskov, B. M. (2019). Meningsløs og meningsfuld tid i sygepleje. In N. Vaaben & M. Plotnikof (Eds.), *Tid til vedfærd? Tidsorganisering i velfærdsprofessionerne* (pp. 59–80). Hans Reitzels forlag.
- Singh, M., Rizvi, F., & Shrestha, M. (2007). Student mobility and the spatial production of cosmopolitan identities. In K. Gulson & C. Symes (Eds.), *Spatial theories of education: Policy and geography matters* (pp. 195–214). New York: Routledge.
- Soja, E. (2010). *Seeking social justice*. University of Minnesota Press.

Open Access. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes - if any - are indicated.

