INTERTWINED HIGHER EDUCATION PLACES AND SPACES

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This essay highlights how the way educational places and spaces are imagined impacts higher education research, policy, and practice.
Background	Drawing on the rapid transition to online education in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, dichotomous thinking about education space is problematized by examining how the physical (e.g., the lecture hall) is intertwined with the digital (e.g., an online course shell).
Methodology	Conceptual essay
Contribution	I illustrate how shifting towards conceptualizing higher education as an intertwined environment, that which is a blended mix of the physical and the digital is a more robust construct that can better assist researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.
Findings	Dichotomous— online or on campus—thinking masks issues of equity and justice deserving of higher education leadership research, policy, and practice in need of attention, which COVID-19 has brought to light.
Recommendations for Practitioners	By embracing an intertwined educational environment construct, practitioners may be better positioned to see opportunities for increasing equity of higher education access.
Recommendation for Researchers	By embracing an intertwined educational environment frame, future research can better examine higher educational equity issues and opportunities.
Impact on Society	The larger societal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will inevitably change individuals and institutions. By revisiting higher education through an intertwined environmental frame, higher education institutions will be better positioned to assist ALL in society.
Future Research	As higher educational institutions grapple with changes in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, future research which problematizes educational space

is needed to better understand the shifting, complex, and nuanced environments where learning, marginalization, and opportunities for change exist.

Keywords   spatial inequality, education technology, space, facilities, blended learning

INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought about mass social isolation, surfacing many questions of institutional access when government policy mandates or strongly suggests campus closures. Using the rapid transition to remote (in most cases online) education in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as a case in point, in this essay I highlight how dichotomous thinking about higher educational spaces (physical places or digital space, not both) may distract researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from examining and reimagining higher education environments in our increasingly digitized world in ways that acknowledge difference. Instead, I suggest how framing higher education access as an intertwined mix of technologies by drawing on ecology may better position thinking in ways that support equity and justice and allow us to better prepare education leaders for the future.

BACKGROUND

On March 19th, 2020 the University of Idaho, like most educational institutions around the world, officially announced they would be moving to distance learning after spring break. President S. Green communicated, "The University of Idaho will deliver classes online/remotely for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester. Classes will not return to face-to-face instruction." Within this message titled *U of I Online/Remote for Remainder of Semester, All Events Canceled* were mentions of access to educational space.

> If returning to campus is your only option, facilities around the state remain physically open with some modifications, including the Moscow campus. If, however, you wish to remain away from campus and learn from home — which we strongly recommend — you can do so for the remainder of the semester.

As a faculty member who was following advice from my dean and the CDC, I received this message via email along with a video. I read the message as I waited for the video to load [buffering marked by …,] to hear the full message from my home in Northern Idaho,

> The transition to remote course delivery has many unknowns. … Many universities across the country are doing this at the same time, which could impact delivery. … We must be patient and flexible as we navigate the onset of online/remote education in the coming weeks.

I, like millions of Americans, live in an area with extremely poor internet access (Busby, Tanberk, & the BroadbandNow Team, 2020; Federal Communications Commission [FCC], 2019).

Idaho is a largely rural state; even Idaho's capital city, Boise, lacks internet service provider competition, equating to higher prices and lower average speeds than in more competitive markets. In rural areas (which includes most of the rest of the state) there are no high-speed broadband providers or no fixed line providers at all, with a satellite internet connection being the only option (Deeds, 2019). Although all K-12 Idaho schools and libraries now have broadband access, at the time of writing they are all closed for the same reasons the university stopped face-to-face courses on campus—social distancing. Idaho's Governor Brad Little announced a statewide stay-at-home order on March 25th, leaving residents with very few other options for accessing free WIFI as most businesses such as coffee shops are now closed. Even in places that remain open, the construct of social distancing means visiting these places puts students at increased health risk. So herein lies a largely under-examined equity issue which the black swan event of COVID-19 has exposed — digital and face-to-face learning spaces are intertwined; yet, they are largely conceptualized as separate.

Framing educational spaces

The way educational spaces are imagined affects (Massey, 2005) the equity with which education is delivered. Educational space is largely seen "as a 'container' within which education simply 'takes (its) place', with varying degrees of effectiveness and efficiency" (B. Green & Letts, 2007). Marsden (1977) observed, "educational phenomena are distributed in space" (p. 21). To Foucault (1984), by problematizing spatial relations, the connection between space, the centers of power, and marginalization can be illuminated. With a focus on architecture in urban spaces, Foucault noted, "three great variables— territory, communication, and speed" (p. 244) as grounds to consider how "space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (p. 252). In what follows, the often-hidden nature of higher education places and spaces are made visible as they are problematized (Foucault, 1984) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic to illuminate the complexity and nuance of educational spaces to assist future higher education research, policy, and practice.

Enfolding education technology and space

Previous scholars have articled the complexity of defining technology (e.g., Braudel, 1985; Marx, 1997; Matthewman, 2011). When describing the role of technology in revolutionary moments, such as Gutenberg's adaptations to the printing press, which enabled the mass production of books beginning in the 1430s, Braudel (1985) draws our attention to social changes. For this essay, which acknowledges social change in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of constricting thinking by articulating a set definition of technology, I align the word technology with the construct of mediation as a phenomenological process which provides access (Jonassen, 1984), in this case access to high education.

Despite rapidly embracing information communication technologies (ICT) in the short-term to sustain higher education access, the extent to which objects and practices come together as elements that support educational spaces are not fixed, neutral, or immobile (Usher, 2002). Loes and Saichaie's (2016) investigation of student cognition and email highlights this construct. By using the digital space as an entry point, unequal user experiences emerge, showcasing how the social and the technical are intertwined within higher education environments. Physical places such as lecture halls are technologies that provide face-to-face access to education just as computers, wires, software, and other ICTs provide remote access to education.

Education places as technology

The architectural design of the lecture hall influences the process that provides educational access as the technical design of the computing device, software, as well as other aspects of network infrastructure influence the process which provides access. The University of Idaho, like most institutions of higher education around the world, has a multitude of buildings, squares, and other physical gathering places designed to support social gatherings both large and small. Stadiums are gathering places for football games and graduations ceremonies. In contrast, a table with two chairs at the end of a hallway shapes behavior to limit social interaction. Although the campus was not closed entirely at the time of article development, social gathering on campus was limited and discouraged, and gathering in online spaces was encouraged to protect physical health, surfacing many questions. Does keeping a few buildings on campus open equal access to education? Is not a building just a container (B. Green & Lett, 2007)? Is not this container part of the very technology needed to access gatherings now online for some of higher education's most vulnerable?

REFRAMING EDUCATIONAL PLACES AND SPACES

For higher education leadership programs to best prepare future leaders in our increasingly digitized world, they must acknowledge and navigate economic and political factors at the intersection of the social and the technical. As telecommunications and technology companies scramble (i.e., Zoom, a

virtual conferencing software changed from paid to free) to "support" the COVID-19 crisis, they ultimately are beholden to their bottom line. Choices to recreate the lecture hall or the meeting room in virtual spaces from off campus physical places is a short-term access solution, but it presents new problems (e.g., questions of surveillance and privacy) that bring to light inequalities worth acknowledging.

Viewing access to education as something that happens either online or face-to-face is a dichotomous trap. Even if resources were abundant — which of course in most higher education settings they are not — thinking about places as replaceable by technology is overly simplifying the realities of what happens socially in these places and spaces which supports equitable opportunities. As I sit alone in my home at my desk (formally my kitchen table) I find myself wondering about the stability of my own internet access and the messiness of access to higher education surfaces. Without a stable and robust internet connection, my access to the university, my students, my advisees, my files, and my colleagues all stop. For my students, who are in the best-case scenario settling into safe places to live, there is a long and growing list of technologies (computer, headphones, WIFI hotspot, software, etc.) without which their access, just like mine, to education is now limited in light of the rush to go remote (which in most cases means online).

CONCLUSION

Moving beyond the dichotomous trap of face-to-face *or* online conceptualization toward an ecological perspective is necessary. Once COVID-19 has passed, education will be face-to-face *and* online like never before. To best conceptualize the quality of access to education in these intertwined environments an ecological perspective must be embraced. Postman (1998) described this sentiment when he shared, "technological change is not additive; it is ecological, which means, it changes everything" (p. 5). The COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity for conceptualizing such change if we avoid dichotomous thinking.

Avoiding dichotomous thinking may assist researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to design, maintain, and sustain these complex and nuanced spaces, by surfacing the many links in the chain of technology (the room, the computer, the WIFI hotspot) that offer both access and barriers simultaneously.

We owe it to learners (including faculty who are learning to shift instructional practice) to work toward the types of change that support the best of what higher education has to offer for *all*. The swift move to innovate during the COVID-19 crisis explicates that change in higher education institutions is possible; however, we have seen how, without nuanced thinking about the complexities of access, "solutions" can equate to marginalization.

The worldwide shut down of physical educational places in response to a viral pandemic exposes the inequities that exist in the remote learning model. These inequities surround access to reliable, affordable ICT internet infrastructure. Learning has always taken place in a "blended" environment, one neither defined solely by the traditional educational places nor by online spaces alone. As the need for new practices and methods given the rise of the higher education field of study is acknowledged (Thacker et al., 2019), we must face this fact: that all learning takes place in this "third space" to some degree, but without recognizing this intertwined environment opportunities to work towards equitable policy and practice are masked.

When the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is over we will find a world where education, like many other institutions, has fundamentally changed. Some might decide that the traditional classroom is no longer necessary, while others will have concluded that remote learning failed them, and they prefer the old way. In reality, what they will be left with is a "third space," for higher education: one where certain functions have emerged as particularly suited to the online model will continue to take place remotely, while other functions will revert to the traditional place on campus.

As higher education researches, policy makers, and practitioners we owe it to our students, faculty, staff, and to society to use the COVID-19 pandemic black swan moment to think more deeply about the intertwined nature of education at present, and use our experience now to design better, more equitable higher education environments that look at the ecological, not just the additive, effects of technology. Ideally what will be left are better, more effective, and equitable higher education models in the future.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Elizabeth Wargo serves as Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Idaho in Coeur d' Alene, Idaho, where she works with aspiring education leaders. She researches issues relating to education innovation, leadership, and change. Elizabeth aims is to help practitioners and policymakers make informed decisions about systematic change that acknowledge local strengths and global possibilities.