



Kent Academic Repository

Phan, Anh Ngoc Quynh and Le, Chloe (2025) *From coffee shops to online platforms: students' construction of and experiences in multiple higher education learning spaces*. Higher Education Research & Development, 44 (1). pp. 222-236. ISSN 1469-8366.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/108684/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2429466>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).



From coffee shops to online platforms: students' construction of and experiences in multiple higher education learning spaces

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan & Chloe Le

To cite this article: Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan & Chloe Le (2025) From coffee shops to online platforms: students' construction of and experiences in multiple higher education learning spaces, Higher Education Research & Development, 44:1, 222-236, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2024.2429466](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2429466)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2429466>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 29 Jan 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 251



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

From coffee shops to online platforms: students' construction of and experiences in multiple higher education learning spaces

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan ^a and Chloe Le ^b

^aCentre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom; ^bDepartment of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Louisiana, Lafayette, United States

ABSTRACT

Learning space has expanded to spaces outside the traditional classroom, such as public transport, cafés, or parks, where students can easily engage in learning activities. In order to understand whether students use classrooms outside class time, where their learning takes place, why, when, and with whom, students' experiences should be at the forefront of the inquiry. This study is among the first that attempts to understand students' experiences of learning spaces in a non-Western higher education context. Data collected from weekly reflective journals and interviews with 10 university students sheds light on their engagement with multiple learning spaces in their everyday life, and their navigation of and their transitions between formal, timetabled and informal, non-timetabled learning spaces. The paper reveals the way personal space is carved from public space and personal time for learning, and how learning involves students' arrangements to take advantage of different spaces for educational purposes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 April 2024

Accepted 5 November 2024

KEYWORDS

Learning spaces; higher education; spatial triad; Vietnam; university students; emotions

Introduction

Learning space is a part of the higher education landscape that is increasingly volatile and fluid. With the emergence of online learning platforms, and especially after the pandemic, the reduced emphasis on didactic instructional methods (Deed & Alterator, 2017), and timetabled and planned teaching like lecture theatres and laboratories (Middleton, 2019), allow students to easily engage in learning activities, watch recorded lectures, participate in asynchronous sessions, or simply study educational materials. The need for informal learning spaces, thus, grows in relation to increased student active learning processes (Beckers et al., 2016a). Learning space, subsequently, has expanded to spaces outside traditional classrooms to include public transport, cafés, or parks. While it may be easy to track the use of formal, timetabled space (such as through attendance systems), it is much more challenging to record and evaluate whether, and how,

CONTACT Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan  n.q.a.phan@kent.ac.uk  Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

other (informal) learning spaces are produced and used by students while these spaces function as important resources of learning (Wu et al., 2021).

In order to understand whether students use classrooms outside class time, where their learning takes place, why, when, and with whom (Oblinger, 2005; Rudd et al., 2006), Beckers et al. (2016b) emphasise that students' experiences should be the key aspect. Nonetheless, studies examining facilities in learning spaces are often framed within the perspectives of managers and staff. Students' voices of their preferences and feelings within the various spaces, both digital and physical, are missing too often (Beckers et al., 2016a; Jessop et al., 2012). Furthermore, Leijon et al. (2022) have pointed out that learning spaces in higher education is an under-researched area and there lacks robust evidence to illuminate the relation between space and student learning. Research into students' experiences of learning spaces in a non-Western higher education context is even rarer. To the best of our knowledge, the current study is among the first that follows this line of inquiry. This study investigates 10 Vietnamese university students' engagement with multiple learning spaces in their everyday life. By analysing students' reflective learning journals and follow-up interviews (Moon, 2006), this paper unpacks students' self-reported experiences in various spatial learning contexts, their choices, construction, and interactions in the learning spaces, and in return, the impact of those learning spaces on their learning.

Learning spaces

Learning spaces generally means spaces in which learning activities happen. According to Oblinger (2005, p. 15), learning spaces are 'regularly scheduled, physical locations designed for face-to-face meetings of instructors and students'. This definition indicates the traditional, formal, institutionalised space such as classrooms, laboratories, libraries or campus space in general. However, learning nowadays takes place not only in such formal spaces but also in almost all spaces possible that provide settings for individual learning or small group activities (Barnett & Temple, 2006; Dalsgaard & Ryberg, 2023; Leijon et al., 2022). Beckers et al. (2015) categorise learning spaces into four main types: (1) classroom space for lectures, benefiting large groups; (2) collaborative spaces suitable for small groups and for face-to-face collaborative and cooperative learning activities; (3) individual study spaces serving self-study purposes; and (4) informal learning spaces that are scattered across the campus or buildings, which means everywhere, from libraries and corridors to coffee bars and restaurants.

Space has a powerful impact on learning, to the extent that 'the layout, location, and arrangement of space and facilities render some behaviours much more likely, and thus more probable, than others' (Strange & Banning, 2022, p. 15). Space configurations exert powerful influences on students' feelings, knowledge creation, communication, and application (Scott-Webber, 2004). In their systematic review, Leijon et al. (2022) indicate that the importance of learning spaces is demonstrated by the way in which they enable active learning, deep engagement and collaborative learning. Within the school or campus context, the setting of a classroom such as seat arrangements, lighting, decor, technology or the spatial layout of halls and corridors, or the clear-cut boundary between teachers' offices and classrooms can all be constitutive of the 'built pedagogy', which refers to 'architectural embodiments of educational philosophies' (Monahan,

2002, p. 5). In other words, space sends messages to students of where to learn and how to learn.

To understand students' experience in learning spaces, Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2011) developed a framework with seven variables that influence the choice of work-space, some of which, researchers such as Beckers et al. (2016b), Jamieson (2003), and Matthews et al. (2011) argue, can be applied to understand the choice of higher education learning environments. These include the functional characteristics related to equipment and comfortable furniture, layout, and comfort characteristics such as light, colour and fitting of the space. Catering services also play a role in students' choice. The increasing popularity of the Internet, the rapid advancement of technologies and the ensuing varied virtual forms of education, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, have further expanded our conception of learning spaces (Dalsgaard & Ryberg, 2023). The idea that learning happens in a fixed location with arranged space use becomes obsolete given the rise of online learning, blended learning, or distance education. Any space, including outdoor spaces, lobby spaces, cafés, and residence halls can advance learning if it provides sufficient comfort, flexibility, technology, or sensory stimulation. Raes (2022) takes an example of students' active engagement in, and beyond, the university's online estate as part of a 'hybrid' learning experience which co-exists with their physical presence in a formal classroom. Additionally, students now can remotely attend formal online lectures within informal physical spaces like their home, campus common rooms or somewhere they find suitable and comfortable. In that sense, learning can encompass an assemblage of spaces, and learning spaces go beyond one specific structure. To further contribute to the literature of higher education learning space and also to address the underrepresented non-Western higher education context in this scholarship area, this paper aims to deepen our understanding of such assemblage of learning spaces by seeking answers to the following questions:

- (1) In students' perceptions, what spaces are conducive and un-conducive to their learning?
- (2) How do students construct these spaces, with whom, and why?

The paper continues with a discussion of the theoretical framework before moving to the methodology and presentation of findings of the study.

Theoretical framework

This study is theoretically informed by Lefebvre's spatial triad (1991), which has been effectively used to unravel power, inequality and exclusion in spatial practices. Researchers have used the triad to explain how social practices are related, and reproduced, in various contexts, including children's classrooms (Mechlenborg & Neergaard, 2024). It consists of three interlinked concepts of space: representations of space, spatial practices, and representational spaces.

Representations of space refers 'to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to frontal relations' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33), or, in other words, 'the world of abstraction, what's in the head rather than in the body' (Merrifield, 2006). This space can be understood as *conceptualised* or *conceived* spaces, and includes symbols, terminology or technical jargon, as well as

paradigms used by professionals and institutions. Meanwhile, spatial practice, or *perceived* space, ‘embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets of characteristics of each social formation’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). Spatial practices include ‘patterns and interactions that connect places and people, images with reality, worth with leisure’ (Merrifield, 2006, p. 110). Therefore, they are crucial in the everyday functions of the society because they direct individual performances in that society. The final concept in Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad is representational space, or the *lived* space, which describes space as ‘directly lived through’ and is the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’ (p. 39). Lived spaces embody ‘complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, and also to art’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). Within the lived space, conflicts with the representations of space can happen, because how we live, think and feel may not be in sync with how we are taught to think, feel and act (Watkins, 2005). Hence, this lived space can be the ground where resistance, disruption, deviation, and difference can emerge and so can new forms of engagement and action. The triad spaces should be understood as interlaced rather than sequential and separate.

Since space, people and practices are connected in a sort of assemblage or entanglement and they can only be understood when being considered in relation to each other, the use of space in thinking allows us to ‘structure problems, find answers, and express and communicate solutions’ (Metoyer et al., 2015, p. 21). In this study, the use of Lefebvre’s spatial triad enables the researchers to unpack the entanglement of students’ choice, preferences, emotions, and access to various kinds of spaces. As students have emotions with, and develop preferences of, certain learning spaces that they engage with on a daily basis, the spatial triad provides a theoretical ground for us to understand how students construct, interact, and are influenced by multiple learning spaces within which they participate.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, students’ participation, creation, and experience of learning spaces recorded in their weekly reflective journals is the focus. Following ethics approval from the second researcher’s institution, the researchers disseminated their call for research participation within their professional networks in Vietnam. There were no criteria for participant recruitment, except that participants must be current students who were studying and living in Hanoi and would commit to journaling at least three entries per week in four weeks and participating in a follow-up online interview. Eleven students participated voluntarily in the study, but one of them dropped out after a month. Apart from Manh, nine students are females. Participant information is included in Table 1.

Before data collection started, the researchers arranged a meeting with the participants to explain the purpose and process of the study. Participants were reassured that their details were kept private, anonymous and confidential, their real names were replaced by pseudonyms, and identifiable information was omitted. They were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Participants’ consent was also obtained at this point. The data collection started with reflective journaling, also known as learning diaries/journals, or learning/response logs. It is perceived as a vehicle for reflection (Moon, 2006) in which students ‘think about various concepts,

Table 1. Participants' information.

Name	Institution	Year in university	Programme major
Manh	University A	1	Transnational media studies
Hang	University B	2	Business Chinese Language
Nhung	University A	3	English language teacher education
Thuy	University C	4	English language
Hien	University C	4	English language
Lan	University A	3	English language teacher education
Tram	University A	3	English language teacher education
Hoan	University A	3	English language teacher education
Mien	University A	1	Transnational media studies
Thuong	University A	1	Transnational media studies

events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning' (Thorpe, 2004, p. 328).

In this research, reflective journals were written by students to reflect on their daily movement, activities and feelings and emotions in multiple spaces they engaged with in Hanoi. We designed a reflective journal entry template that could help the participants reflect systematically and rigorously. Each participant was given access to their own Google doc journal which was also accessible by the two researchers. Participants could express their views informally, openly, and creatively in their journal entries. We also responded to students' writing to keep the reflective journals dialogic and interactive by using appropriate emojis (e.g., a smiley face) against their account to, for instance, compliment their achievements (Padgett et al., 2021). In total, we have 178 journal entries.

A week after the journaling process ended, the authors conducted online semi-structured interviews with each participant. The purpose of the interviews was to further explore how the spaces empowered or inhibited certain learning behaviours and why students chose particular learning spaces for specific study activities. Each interview lasted between 40–70 min, and the language was Vietnamese. Before interviewing, the students were reminded that they could terminate the discussion at any point, and they were encouraged to only share experiences that they felt comfortable discussing. Consent for the interview to be audio-recorded was also obtained. The recordings were later transcribed before data analysis. The researchers maintained communication with the participants for member checking and data clarification.

During data analysis, each researcher closely read the journaling and interview data to preliminarily code through both manifest and latent codes, and uncovered the nuances of participants' writing and responses (David & Sutton, 2011) before exchanging their draft codes. The researchers then together clustered the codes into categories and then general themes in subsequent rounds of coding. To these ends, the Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad was applied to shed light on the conditions of different learning spaces. The researchers only translated the excerpts into English that were presented in the article.

Findings

This section unfolds the spatial elements mediating abstractions and experience through the three aspects of spatial unity: representations of space, spatial practices, and spaces of representation.

Representations of space

This space refers to symbols, terminology or technical jargon, as well as paradigms used by professionals and institutions. In this study, the university as a conceptualised space provides a rigorous Vietnamese cultural capital which indicates the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, mannerisms, material belongings, and credentials. We will elaborate on the institutionalisation of higher education learning space through the symbolic structure of the university and campus.

The campus space, as written in the students' journals, was particularly associated with scheduled time/timetable, which was quantifiable through the module sessions, assessment weeks, semesterisation, or level of study. Journal entries of freshman or sophomore participants had a noticeably higher frequency of recounting a presentation, an assignment, in other words, the detailed coursework along with teachers' and peers' reactions to their work. Meanwhile, final-year students like Thuy and Hien spent less time on the physical campus for class attendance. They described cramming for finals or their thesis as well as feeling nostalgic of a student life. One student wrote: 'After class, I took some pictures of the hall of the building to remind myself that it was the final day at university' (Thuy, entry 4).

Deadlines were regarded as a symbol of higher education learning by the students and were ubiquitously seen in their entries and interviews. These temporal landmarks of university life were the invisible force driving students' learning, like a self-control apparatus, and they also had an impact on students' choice of learning space. For some students, home was ideal to work towards the deadlines. Thuong, who lived in the dormitory, often asked her roommates to buy meals for her while she stayed on the dorm bed trying to finish her assignments because she had postponed many deadlines to the last minute: 'Partly because I was lazy and partly because after moving to the dormitory, I seemed to follow the habits of everyone here. It skews my schedule a lot' (entry 5). Another student, Thuy, wrote: 'I have an assignment deadline ... studying at home increases my performance since I have all my books and materials' (entry 10). Sometimes, students like Nhi and Tram would choose different places to study for deadlines, such as a coffee shop where they felt they could work more productively than at home. Deadlines, therefore, were associated with a learning space of productivity and concentration.

The analysis of the representations of space illustrates how students' learning space in higher education involves their management of time and the choice of space to support these time management strategies, and their presence in and absence from the campus space. This understanding of higher education learning space is important for the participants because it was different from their secondary school experiences where, according to their interviews, the learning space was quite structured and fixed in both space (within the school), time (strictly scheduled), and people (classmates and teachers). It also informed their spatial practices and lived space, as presented in the following sections.

Spatial practices

Spatial practice in the Lefebvrian triad 'embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation', which ultimately 'ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). In other words, spatial practices embodied in our performative actions in spaces legitimise and re-affirm the structure of the world through pre-existing socio-spatial arrangements.

For the participants, their spatial practices were enacted on the physical campus and the virtual space.

Physical campus

Space organises experience through its layout and, thus, impacts our spatial consumption, experience, and practices. The campus space emerged in students' journals and interviews as the formal space to learn. Students were on campus mostly to attend lectures, as Manh said in the interview 'I come to my university for academic learning'. Besides classrooms and lecture halls, participants utilised the facilities on campus for their learning, especially for exam revision and assignment completion purposes. Hoan, Mien and Thuong all mentioned the learning hubs on campus as a productive learning space for them. These learning hubs were within walking distance from their dormitory. Hoan elaborated on her preference of one hub over the others, citing its quietness and privacy as the most valuable qualities – so much that she would not want to recommend the place to many people for fear of it becoming overcrowded.

However, some participants did not find the campus space particularly appealing. Hien, in the interview, alluded to a lack of security as the reason why the campus library was not her learning space: 'We had to leave all our belongings in a locker, I once lost my purse and other people had their laptop or a whole backpack stolen'. Meanwhile, Nhung admitted in the interview that 'there are many buildings that I don't know exist, if somebody asks me where building A is, I can't tell them ... I don't really like the university space'. Another student, Lan, found the design and functioning of spaces within the university limiting students within the academic realm. From her observation,

You literally can't escape the academic atmosphere, for example, the coffee shop is right next to the printing and copying services. Everywhere you go, you will still be in this atmosphere or overhearing people talking about their learning. (Interview)

Even though students did not feel alienated, or distanced from the learning space within the university campus, they did not feel attached to it, nor developed special bonds with it. Their somewhat indifferent feelings towards the campus indicate a lack of sense of ownership of and agency in this space. In other words, they participated in this learning space, but did not demonstrate clear attempts to reconfigure it, or make it a place of belonging. These reflections also exhibited some limitations of the physical campus, where privacy, quietness and safety were luxuries that were not always afforded. The interesting paradox here is that while campus is associated with formal learning, it is more symbolic of mandatory education than inspirational for individual learning.

The interactions with peers permeated the lived space that the students participated in on a daily basis. While most participants had generally pleasant experiences in working with other students, Manh looked at this from a different angle:

It's a strange feeling, knowing the semester is coming to an end, and familiar faces becoming less familiar. Yet, I feel nothing but an inscrutable ... relief? [...] It does not feel as bittersweet as when you separate from high or middle school classmates – maybe because university life really is transient. (entry 2)

The fleeting nature represented in higher education made Manh feel disconnected, which could partially result from the fact that he was a freshman and also a male

student in a predominantly female-oriented cohort. Other freshmen like Thuong and Mien, as well as the senior students, on the contrary, showed more positive reflections on teamwork and their peers. They visited each other's hometown or private house, formed study groups, and shared advice – all in a dynamic and constantly evolving space. Mien described university as a life-changing experience from high school days, where instructors were setting high standards and providing abundant support with individualised placements and instructions to ensure students could achieve the best performance in their capacity. These interactions made the physical space crucial for the students' effective and transformative learning.

Virtual space

The virtual learning space acted as a near perfect substitute for campus space for both individual self-directed learning and group work. The engagement with digital learning space emerged from the students' learning objectives and employment purposes. They made use of the tools to perform actions that aimed at mediating the goals, such as providing online tutoring services, learning resources, and social networking with a community of shared interests. Hang wrote in her entry journal:

I often practise my Chinese speaking skills on a website called free4talk. Today I talked to a Taiwanese man. Our topic was language, language features, and comparisons between Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese Mandarin and other dialects ... He said my accent was a mixture of Southern Chinese and Taiwanese. But I want to speak like news anchors in Chinese news channels – Northern Chinese ... We also discussed the differences in the societies and marriages between a Taiwanese and a Vietnamese. (entry 3)

In this digital learning space, Hang enacted her learner's agency by expanding the imagined geographical boundaries of her Chinese language immersion, thus increasing and preparing for her (future) interactions with the outside world. She capitalised on her digital learning space and turned it into the opening gate of the world, enabling new dimensions in her knowledge construction. She was able to learn about a new Chinese dialect, enriching cultural exposure and enhancing knowledge outside her major. In that sense, the digital learning space has embodied effects on Hang, enabling her to be transformative, agentive and creative in learning.

The digital space was where students could regulate their own working pace, deploy their own personal tools, develop their own working methods and carve out their own space for non-academic commitments of their own interests. Tram's experience is one of the most telling examples. She narrated in the interview:

I write novels, I published two novels online in a forum. It's not like I earn money from that, I will one day, I don't know, contact a publisher about my novels and publish them. But I enjoy this online space where I can write my novels and attract my readers. (Interview)

In contrast, for some participants, online platforms were not their best option when it comes to learning. Lan found it 'more engaging when I can see my teachers and my classmates. Sometimes it's also the non-verbal communication that helps me concentrate more' (interview). Despite her preference for in-person interactions, Lan recognised that the virtual space was an indispensable part of her learning, and it provided the convenience and flexibility needed for individual tasks. The virtual space was significant to the students' learning because it strengthened their agency, allowed them to produce

their own learning materials, connected with peers, and created and managed their digital space. This perspective, as Sclater (2008) comments, needs to be explored more in-depth within the area of personal learning environments since it emphasises the importance of students managing, and making use of, their own digital tools effectively.

Furthermore, the virtual learning space established an open space for teamwork and engaged students in dialogues that contributed to their collaborative learning. This space allowed for flexibility in both time and place. As described in multiple entries, the digital infrastructures of the virtual space facilitated group work and organised co-production of teamwork products. When asked in the interview why they relied more on online meetings than physical campus space for group work, Nhung, Lan and Hoan all agreed that it was more convenient to meet virtually since they could schedule a late meeting at around 10pm after finishing their part-time teaching jobs. They would continue the discussion in the class on the next day if necessary. This coordination echoes Ryberg et al.'s (2018) contention that collaborative work encompasses constant switches between online and offline spaces, involving both physical and digital resources. However, the virtual learning space possessed a stronger social and 'participative quality' (Crook & Mitchell, 2012, p. 122) that the physical campus, with restrictions of time and access, could not offer, for instance, quietness and privacy.

Spaces of representation

Spaces of representation is the space of inhabitants and users, or the *lived* space that captures what is felt and what is experienced by the body as it moves through the material enactments of space. For the participants, such spaces include coffee shops and their 'home'.

Coffee shops

While campus was not an ideal learning space, coffee shops were a popular substitute for campus that many of the participants resorted to for a learning-conducive environment. Six out of ten participants frequented various coffee shops on a daily basis to complete their school work. For instance, Tram commented that 'the atmosphere in the coffee shop always helps me work effectively' (entry 6), while Thuy observed 'most of the customers are also students and people who go there and work, which makes the atmosphere resemble a real office' (entry 3). The students also referred to the materialities and layout of the cafes such as sitting arrangements, light, sockets' availability, secure parking and flexible hours of operation to be the main reasons for their preference. They made a conscious choice of going to a cafe for learning despite the occasional decreased quality, unfavourable background music, and increasing cost of the drinks, in return for the productivity that could not be found in campus learning hubs, private homes, or rental rooms. In Thuy's explanation, 'studying at a cafe sometimes is costly. However, during exam days, I am willing to spend money for productive study' (entry 8).

It is interesting to note that some students found cafes to be 'noisy' spaces whilst others might see them quiet enough for concentration. In her journal entry 5, Thuy described the shop she frequented to study as having an 'ambience' which she enjoyed. Meanwhile, Tram grew 'so comfortable with the noise and music there that my friends are surprised at my level of concentration while people are talking loudly'

(entry 14). These contrasting views, however, converged where the students valued their feelings and emotions brought by the view and location of the place, combined with a cosy ambiance, a relaxing atmosphere, and nice music. Nhung and Hoan even showed a complex navigation of coffee shops as learning spaces. They had such an extensive knowledge of the shops around the city that they went through a mental list of different places and evaluated which would be most suitable for working on a certain day; sometimes it was because they wanted to try new drinks, and other times, it was because they wanted to explore a new place before adding it to a list of ‘study go-tos’. It is clearly demonstrated in the students’ journals and interviews that they developed a particular preference of coffee houses as a learning space.

‘Home’ space

The majority of the participants (seven out of 10) who are not Hanoi residents lived in the university dormitory or rented a place to live. Dormitory or a shared rental studio apartment became their ‘home’ and was another representational space where learning, though constricted, took place through movements and lack thereof. This was a peculiar space because it had characteristics of both a shared space and a private ‘home’. For those who chose to live in dormitories on campus like Hoan and Thuong, sharing 20 square metres between 10 people was a common expectation. Consequently, there was no spatial boundary between learning space and spaces reserved for other daily activities such as sleeping, eating, or recreation because all of them occurred within the allocated bunk bed that became privatised by simply drawing a curtain (Figure 1).

For those who rented a small private room in an apartment building specifically designed for student renters (*nhà trọ sinh viên*) and shared it with roommates, like Hang, most of the time learning would happen on their bed because of the limited total area (for instance 10–15 square metres for three tenants). Such an amalgam of home, study, entertainment, sleep and other activities required students to consider various factors when using it as a learning space to avoid disturbing their roommates, such as the time at which they would engage in online group meetings, the brightness of their table lamp, their volume of speech, and their use of earphones.

Lan, Tram, and Nhung lived with their families in their private homes. They therefore had more liberty in conducting their daily activities where learning was separated from cooking, dining, and recreation. However, they still preferred going outside to study and work, because home could be a source of distractions with household tasks or conversations with family members. Nhung emphasised the atmosphere once again, stating that when immersed in a separate environment, she could get a lot more done within the same amount of time (interview). For Lan, studying at the cafes was her way of bonding with classmates and enjoying her favourite drinks, which supports O’Connor’s (2005) finding that being able to eat and drink contributes to making a space attractive to learners.

Despite their different living arrangements, all participants agreed that home could be a productive learning space since learning at ‘home’ meant comfort, convenience, privacy, independence, and autonomy to multi-task. However, the tendency to go out for learning was more prevalent, which could be attributed to a compelling need to have the right mood, the right setting, and the right environment conducive for learning. In contrast, the physical campus was only frequented by the participants when they were required to attend classes.



Figure 1. Participants' personal living and learning space.

Discussion and implications

From Lefebvre's spatial triad analysis, we argue that similar to any other social space, students' learning spaces are 'a construction and material manifestation of social relations which reveals cultural assumptions and practices' (Barker, 2008, p. 379). The students' learning spaces intersected formal physical spaces on the university campus (such as classrooms and lecture halls), informal learning spaces (such as coffee houses, common learning areas and home), and virtual spaces facilitated by digital platforms. Except for those who lived in the dormitory on campus and thus tended to arrange life within the campus parameters, the students' living situations and their travel time did not impact the choice of where to study. Their spatial preferences for learning depended more on the ambience of the places, their emotions and interactions within those spaces, and the materialities that the spaces could offer to facilitate their learning activities. This emphasises the importance of the physical space to students' learning and collegial place making.

Using Lefebvre's spatial theory to understand informal learning spaces for university students provides a nuanced lens that comes with both benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, Lefebvre provided a helpful encapsulation of space as fluidly relational and constantly changing through networks of power. This allows higher education administrators to recognise students' active contribution to the meaning and usage of informal learning spaces. The emphasis on the lived space illustrates that students transformed those informal spaces according to their academic, social and emotional needs, which might not be affordable in traditional classroom settings. On the other hand, Lefebvre's theory showed certain constraints, including the separation of space and time and an ambiguous connection between tangible aspects of space such as seating arrangement, lighting, or background noise, which were all critical to the satisfaction of participants in this study with their chosen spaces. Finally, the theory left open an uncharted territory of technological elements in modern day learning spaces, which was vital to students' engagement and productivity at every level of education in the twenty-first century. Working through these limitations, we attempted to include the temporal landscape of spatial production where appropriate, with attention to the 'contradictory, conflictual, and, ultimately, the hidden spatial intention embedded in every life and every specific space that one encounters' (Mechlenborg & Neergaard, 2024, p. 97). While students did not have control over the codes of conducts, rules or norms in the formal university space, they made deliberate choices about the multiple informal spaces of learning based on their perception of those spaces and the social, physical, and emotional impacts on themselves. This exemplified how the participants achieved certain spatial competence and conducted certain spatial performances over time through the constant conceptualisations and abstractions about the world of higher education.

This study shows that although campuses might offer similar characteristics to public spaces, such as having cafeterias and common areas on campus that could be used for social interactions and learning, 'the city as the campus' will foreseeably be the trend (for example Beckers et al., 2016b). The students in this study did not develop much attachment to their campus and they related to the campus space in 'transactional ways' (Berman, 2020, p. 127). It means that their interactions with peers were not strongly promoted in other places on campus, while the campus space almost overlapped with the idea of classroom learning. In this sense, the campus space is more associated with students' formal learning and it separates learning from students' everyday life, rather than being a space that relates to and plays a role in their daily activities. We then argue that the view of a 'sticky campus' – a campus space that promotes both learning and social encounters (Acker & Miller, 2005) – is more relevant to those who live in dormitories or student accommodations on or in the immediate vicinity of campus.

The authors provided insights for higher education institutions in building design that supports student-centred learning and collaborative learning principles, which have gained significant advocacy of policy makers and educators in Vietnam for the past two decades (Pham, 2010; Tran et al., 2020). We suggest that higher education institutions in Vietnam provide more attractive and appealing informal learning spaces that offer their students more alternatives and demonstrate an understanding about relationships between space and those inside it. Simultaneously, it is important to draw the attention of those at the manager level of universities to the traditional physical learning environment such as classrooms and lecture theatres, which students use not

only because of the required attendance but also because they consider it crucial in their learning experiences. Therefore, purposefully created learning spaces will help develop a student learning community that increases students' overall satisfaction with the institution and their education experience.

We recognise that culture is a factor that contributes to the lacuna in literature of higher education learning spaces in an Asian context like Vietnam. First, since good education is highly regarded in the society and considered a good investment and social capital, the discourse of learning is normally associated with schooling and examination (Le et al., 2022). Learning is often institutionalised and presumed to 'properly' take place within an institution or classroom. Informal learning space, therefore, is rarely paid attention. Second, teachers, students and examinations have always taken precedence in any discussion of learning and education in Vietnam while materialities that facilitate learning all go under 'infrastructure', which mostly means classrooms. Nevertheless, we are reminded by Mulcahy's (2018) conceptualisation of learning space that it is 'something we do (stage, perform, enact), rather than something we have (infrastructure)' (p. 13). The findings in this study show that thinking of learning spaces such as campus, lecture halls, and classrooms as infrastructure could overlook the 'multiplicity, mutability and mutual inclusivity of spatial and pedagogic practices' (Mulcahy, 2018, p. 13) and fail to reinforce students' sense of belonging. In this study, we highlight how fluid movement, home bases, informal and public spaces can be important in students' spatial experiences of learning, belonging, and emotions. In so doing, we hope to respond to Pawlicka-Deger's (2021) questions for humanities practices, namely 'How can we study the connections between humanities venues (e.g., a library's reading room, office, workshop, lab, makerspace) and the knowledge produced there?', and 'How can grassroots initiatives play a transformative role in establishing a place of/for humanities on the university campus?'

Conclusion

In this article, we have demonstrated the ways in which the learning spaces of 10 Vietnamese students were created and embedded in their everyday experience, and how these spaces co-existed and happened simultaneously on a daily basis. Students' navigations of these spaces revealed their agency and emotions. It is important to acknowledge that it is at the everyday level that students mapped out their various learning spaces that contributed to their overall higher education experiences. This research extends the literature of learning space to include not only campus, home, and digital platforms but also the dimensions of leisure (cafes). It reveals the way in which personal space is carved from public space and personal time for learning and how learning involves students' arrangement to take advantage of these spaces for educational purposes. The findings contribute to the discussion of the students' multiplicity of experiences in higher education in Vietnam that can be transferable to other Asian contexts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9979-1321>

Chloe Le  <http://orcid.org/0009-0005-7558-8907>

References

- Acker, S. R., & Miller, M. D. (2005). Campus learning spaces: Investing in how students learn. *Educause Center for Applied Research Research Bulletin*, 8, 1–11.
- Appel-Meulenbroek, R., Groenen, P., & Janssen, I. (2011). An end-user's perspective on activity-based office concepts. *Journal of Corporate Real Estate*, 13(2), 122–135. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14630011111136830>
- Barker, C. (2008). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice*. Sage Publications.
- Barnett, R., & Temple, P. (2006). *Impact on space of future changes in higher education (UK higher education space management project 2006/10)*. Higher Education Funding Council for England.
- Beckers, R., Van der Voordt, T., & Dewulf, G. (2015). A conceptual framework to identify spatial implications of new ways of learning in higher education. *Facilities*, 33(1/2), 2–19. <https://doi.org/10.1108/F-02-2013-0013>
- Beckers, R., Van der Voordt, T., & Dewulf, G. (2016a). Why do they study there? Diary research into students' learning space choices in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35(1), 142–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1123230>
- Beckers, R., van der Voort, T., & Dewulf, G. (2016b). Learning space preferences of higher education students. *Building and Environment*, 104, 243–252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2016.05.013>
- Berman, N. (2020). A critical examination of informal learning spaces. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(1), 127–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1670147>
- Crook, C., & Mitchell, G. (2012). Ambience in social learning: Student engagement with new designs for learning spaces. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 42(2), 121–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2012.676627>
- Dalsgaard, C., & Ryberg, T. (2023). A theoretical framework for digital learning spaces: Learning in individual spaces, working groups, communities of interest, and open connections. *Research in Learning Technology*, 31, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.25304/rlt.v31.3084>
- David, M., & Sutton, C. (2011). *Social research: An introduction*. Sage.
- Deed, C., & Alterator, S. (2017). Informal learning spaces and their impact on learning in higher education: Framing new narratives of participation. *Journal of Learning Spaces*, 6(3), 54–58.
- Jamieson, P. (2003). Designing more effective on-campus teaching and learning spaces: A role for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 8(1–2), 119–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144042000277991>
- Jessop, T., Gubby, L., & Smith, A. (2012). Space frontiers for new pedagogies: A tale of constraints and possibilities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(2), 189–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.503270>
- Le, A. V., Han, P., Khaing, M. M., & Farrar, O. (2022). An emerging dragon: Vietnamese education after resolution 29. In F. M. Reimers, U. Amaechi, A. Banerji, & M. Wang (Eds.), *Education to build back better* (pp. 99–125). Springer.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Leijon, M., Nordmo, I., Tieva, Å., & Troelsen, R. (2022). Formal learning spaces in higher education—a systematic review. *Teaching in Higher Education, Advance Online Publication*, 1–22.
- Matthews, K. E., Andrews, V., & Adams, P. (2011). Social learning spaces and student engagement. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(2), 105–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.512629>
- Mechlenborg, M., & Neergaard, M. d. (2024). Lefebvre's spatial triad for children: A teaching model for spatial thinking in the classroom. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 33(2), 94–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10382046.2023.2298074>
- Merrifield, A. (2006). *Henri Lefebvre: A critical introduction*. Routledge.

- Metoyer, S. K., Bednarz, S. W., & Bednarz, R. S. (2015). Spatial thinking in education: Concepts, development, and assessment. In O. Muñiz, A. Demirci, & J. Van der Schee (Eds.), *Geospatial technologies and geography education in a changing world. Advances in geographical and environmental science* (pp. 21–33). Springer.
- Middleton, A. (2019). *Reimagining spaces for learning in higher education*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Monahan, T. (2002). Flexible space and built pedagogy: Emerging IT embodiments. *Inventio*, 4(1), 1–19. http://www.doit.gmu.edu/inventio/past/display_past.asp?plD = spring02&slD = monahan
- Moon, J. (2006). *Learning journals: A handbook for reflective practice and professional development* (2nd ed). Routledge.
- Mulcahy, D. (2018). Assembling spaces of learning ‘In’ museums and schools: A practice-based sociomaterial perspective. In E. Ellis, & P. Goodyear (Eds.), *Spaces of teaching and learning, understanding teaching-learning practice* (pp. 13–29). Springer.
- Oblinger, D. (2005). Leading the transition from classrooms to learning spaces. *Educause Quarterly*, 28(1), 14–18.
- O’Connor, R. A. (2005). *Seeing DuPont within Sewanee and student life. Task Force Final Report for the Jesse Ball duPont Library*.
- Padgett, C., Moffitt, R. L., & Grieve, R. (2021). More than words: Using digital cues to enhance student perceptions of online assignment feedback. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 49, 100789–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2020.100789>
- Pawlicka-Deger, U. (2021). Place matters: Thinking about spaces for humanities practices. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 20(3), 320–338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022220961750>
- Pham, T. H. T. (2010). Implementing a student-centered learning approach at Vietnamese higher education institutions: Barriers under layers of casual layered analysis (CLA). *Journal of Futures Studies*, 15(1), 21–38.
- Raes, A. (2022). Exploring student and teacher experiences in hybrid learning environments: Does presence matter? *Postdigital Science and Education*, 4(1), 138–159. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-021-00274-0>
- Rudd, T., Gifford, C., Morrison, J., & Facer, K. (2006). *Opening education. What if ... ? Re-imagining learning spaces*. Futurelab.
- Ryberg, T., Davidsen, J., & Hodgson, V. (2018). Understanding nomadic collaborative learning groups. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 49(2), 235–247. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12584>
- Sclater, N. (2008). Web 2.0, personal learning environments, and the future of learning management systems. *Research Bulletin*, 13(13), 1–13.
- Scott-Webber, L. (2004). *In sync: Environment behavior research and the design of learning spaces*. Society for College and University Planning.
- Strange, C., & Banning, J. (2022). *Educating by design: Creating campus learning environment that works*. Jossey-Bass.
- Thorpe, K. (2004). Reflective learning journals: From concept to practice. *Reflective Practice*, 5(3), 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462394042000270655>
- Tran, N. L. H., Phan, P. T. N., & Tran, H. L. K. (2020). Implementing the student-centred teaching approach in Vietnamese universities: The influence of leadership and management practices on teacher engagement. *Educational Studies*, 46(2), 188–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2018.1555453>
- Watkins, C. (2005). Representations of space, spatial practices and spaces of representation: An application of Lefebvre’s spatial triad. *Culture and Organization*, 11(3), 209–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759550500203318>
- Wu, X., Kou, Z., Oldfield, P., Heath, T., & Borsi, K. (2021). Informal learning spaces in higher education: Student preferences and activities. *Buildings*, 11(6), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings11060252>