Exploring studio proximities: Space, time, being

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Exploring studio proximities: Space, time, being

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Abstract: The studio remains central in design education but has been severely tested during the emergency transition in design education during the global Covid-19 pandemic. This period highlighted problems and opportunities experienced in translating studio to online and distance modes of education, many of which arose because of the dramatic shift in use of space and time. By investigating how educators conceptualised space and time in descriptions around learning, it is possible to make visible some of our foundational assumptions in studio education practice. These assumptions are important to take account of as educators transition to whatever new normal may emerge in the next years. A series of theoretical points resulting in pragmatic suggestions are presented to enable educators to reflect and develop their teaching materials independently of mode of learning and teaching.

Keywords: Distance design education; Online design education; Covid-19 pandemic; Studio education

1. Introduction and context

One thing almost all design education writers and researchers tend to agree on is the centrality of the design studio to design education (Cuff, 1992; Oxman, 1999; Goldschmidt et al., 2010; Crowther, 2013). Even when the role of studio is questioned, it is still generally recognised as having some value as a form or mode of learning and teaching in art and design (Brown, 2021). Historically, the studio as a place of practice was also necessarily a place of education. Its transfer to the academy began in the 19th century as a place of education through simulated (or blended) practice (Sennett, 2008), expanding during the 20th century and globalising design education to the exclusion of many other curricular forms (for examples, see: Barbosa, 2019; Mamvuto, 2019; Martins et al., 2019; Staikidis and Morris, 2019).

Shulman’s (2005) highly cited work on the signature pedagogy of design outlines the centrality of the studio as the place of design education and the idea of studio as a signature pedagogy has been since repeated (Crowther, 2013). Updated framings of signature pedagogies in design confirm the place of studio as part of a broader changing but persistent
practice (Shreeve, 2011), confirming its centrality to design education as a result of this adaptability (Hetland et al., 2007; Gray and Smith, 2016).

The global COVID-19 pandemic challenged the centrality of the studio. The immediate and sudden loss of physical studio space removed a place, method, mode and domain of learning and teaching. For teachers in non-constructivist or highly didactic subject domains it can be hard to imagine the significance of this change because design is so strongly dependent on constructivist and emergent teaching methods. A motivation for this paper is to not only explore the obvious loss of function and facility, but to make visible the unexpected and under-recognised affordances that studio provided, evidence through recognising their loss.

As design schools transition back to some new ‘normal’ it is critical that we learn from the experiences of the last two years. The unprecedented nature of events created a setting that must be viewed as an emergency transition in design education (Winters, 2021). The effects of the emergency setting must be considered in any comparison or scholarly work that explores design education (indeed, any education). Comparison of emergency responses to existing, planned design distance education courses must be made very carefully (Jones and Lotz, 2021).

2. Approach

It is only in the past few decades that the complexity and subtlety of how students learn in studio has been a detailed focus for rigorous design education research. This is revealing the complexity of studio as an ecology of praxis, not simply a transactional educational setting (Farias and Wilkie, 2016). For example, researchers are now aware of the critical importance of the social learning mechanisms (Ashton and Durling, 2016; Jones, 2020), the importance of informalities and the ‘hidden’ aspects of teaching (Corazzo, 2019; Gray, 2013), or the power structures and asymmetries that emerge, despite the claims of studio being an open and ‘flat’ place to learn (Webster, 2005, 2007; Mewburn, 2011).

This may seem obvious to studio practitioners and educators: studio is rich, complex and messy. When this is described to novices (new students, other educators, administrators, etc.) it can be difficult to convey the necessary complexity in ways they can understand without them experiencing it. Like Quist, quoted in Schön (Schön, 1987):

“I can tell you that there is something you need to know […] But I cannot tell you what it is in a way you can now understand. I can only arrange for you to have the right sorts of experiences for yourself.”

The word ‘experiences’ is critical here: the type of knowledge at work in studio is experiential and contingent making it difficult to communicate as some objectively identifiable entity, particularly to those used to a transactional or behavioural model of education. As a community of educators, we often lack the language to engage in such communication because it is not necessarily our ‘first language’ (Freedman, 2019; Meager and Hall, 2019). This has resulted in studio being described either very superficially and reductively (surfaces, interactions, things, people, etc.) or in language and concepts that are
untranslatable because they attempt to describe phenomena and experiences that are not readily translatable. For audiences without the experiential reference points around studio this is what can seem “important and frustrating” (Lyon, 2011, p. 26).

It is this first point that is the object of interest in this paper and the tendency to focus on superficialities in studio that arose during the emergency teaching transition. It’s easy to go into studio and see only the walls, floors, desks, students, models, etc. and think that what we see is what studio is. But these superficialities are only part of what studio is – possibly even the least part. As Meadows suggests, we far too often value only what we (can) measure (Meadows, 1997), and in doing so we often lose the richness of praxis that exists in studio.

Such difficulties are referred to in McGimpsy’s (2011) criticism of design education research, outlining three relevant problems that arise: we focus only on what works; policy is driven by what literature there is; and silences allow claims without basis to be made. Over the past year, educators have had to confront many of these existing ‘silences’ because their absence has made them visible, or they have had to be made explicit to continue teaching. Such visibilities, it is argued, have considerable potential knowledge.

This paper explores the ways in which educators have spoken about studio over the past two years and what this shows about our understanding of design education. The lesson from The Open University UK from 50 years of teaching design remotely is that being distant forces you to consider exactly what it is you mean about design and how it should be taught and practiced (Cross and Holden, 2020; Design@50 Panel Discussion, 2021). In doing so we reveal far more of our knowledge than we often realise, including what we don’t know: our assumptions, tacit knowledge, implicit behaviours, etc.

To support such other forms of knowing, images have been used throughout this paper to help convey concepts and ideas in a visual/conceptual way. Alternatively, if the reader prefers, these can be ignored and the article read without reference to them.

Figure 1. Legend for diagrams used in the paper: Individual students engage in different types of curricular events (informal, planned and critical/key events). These happen over time.
This paper is a reflexive review of case studies and learning design accounts from the past 2 years, many of which are presented in the Design and Technology Education journal Special Issue, *Design Education: Teaching in Crisis* (Jones and Lotz, 2021). It places some of the lessons from these cases into a general descriptive frame, using space, time and being to identify a series of important issues and lessons that arose during this time. The issues identified tend to be matters that continue to be less visible than other more obvious ones.

3. Time

One property of distance education that became apparent to many in the early stages of the pandemic was the lack of synchronicity usually experienced in a physical studio setting (Hepburn and Borthwick, 2021). It is perhaps the most obvious affordance of studio space: that people are present in studio at the same time.

3.1 Synchronous and semi-synchronous

Early in the emergency teaching response it was common to talk about studio time using two simplified modes: synchronous and asynchronous. **Synchronous studio** usually referred to staff and/or students being present at the same time and using real-time communications to indicate presence and facilitate immediate interaction.

**Figure 2.** Synchronous interaction, where students have planned and regular contact points throughout the curriculum, including informal (e.g. timetabled studio), planned (e.g. desk crits), and critical / key points (e.g. final submissions).

Asynchronous usually referred to variable contact points between staff and/or students using communication media or touchpoints that did not rely on real-time or immediate contact.
Figure 3. Asynchronous interaction, where students have no organised, planned or formal contact points at specific times.

However, few design studios work in either of these modes all the time. Pure synchronicity might be used for specific activities (such as demonstration, safety discussion, key assessment points), and full asynchronicity is often used between other fixed points as a necessary way to support student-centred activity. This contrast between time as a simplistic ‘either/or’ and the complexity of different types of synchronicity that actually exist in studio are behind the challenges faced by educators relying on direct synchronicity as a replacement for proximity (Fleischmann, 2021; Tessier and Aubry-Boyer, 2021).

What is more often found in studios is a spectrum of synchronicities between different actors, around groupings, or events, often organised around other fixed points in time (e.g. group tuition, check-ins, informal crits, assessment points, etc.). Such a structure could be considered semi-synchronous.

Figure 4. Semi-synchronous contact, where students make contact at defined points (e.g. interim crits) and work toward a specific fixed point (e.g. final submission), but where the remaining activity is informal or not formally structured.
The blackboard in Rigley's (2020) studio recipe is a good example of a semi-synchronous form of studio structure (Figure 5), where the organisational principle is a weekly coordination meeting around a spatially located blackboard. In this case the studio structure uses rhythms of time (weeks) to organise students’ organisation of activity in studio, mirroring practices found in many professional design studios and organisations.

Figure 5. Diagram of the learning design for The Chunky Studio (Rigley, 2020)

This is a technique informally referred to in online and distance education as ‘chunking’ (Jones, 2020). A week is a useful cognitive chunk because it is well bounded, easy to imagine and conceptualise in functional terms, and yet still provides enough flexibility of time to deal with variations in individual time requirements. Pedagogically, ‘the week’ is a useful container for a wide range of activities, structures, and many other opportunities for learning because it is as a conception of time: an idea of what it means for something in some context.

3.2 Semi-Asynchronous
As any designer knows, not everything can be chunked neatly. A design project might comprise chunks but the project overall can have a very different size and shape in time. The project is another common teaching device in most design curricula and can vary in complexity, length and educational structure (Lee, 2009). What is common to almost all design projects is their constructivist nature and that, no matter the stage of learning, there is necessarily some aspect of the project that involves student initiative and direction over some period of time (from Adderley et al. (1975) in Lee, (2009)1).

Like chunks, a project may have clear synchronous fixed points but may have much more asynchronous, or flexible, points in between. The project could be described as a semi-asynchronous entity in studio.

1 The project types developed by Lee (2009) and Project Brief analysis framework by Sosa (2020) are useful to consider when developing any project-based learning design and especially in an online and distance setting.
Figure 6. Semi-asynchronous contact, where only a specific fixed point is defined (e.g. portfolio or project submission), and where the remaining activity is informally structured, if at all.

This, again, may seem an entirely obvious point but understanding the ‘textures’ of time in a project is a key part of any design education. These may very well be conceptual chunks themselves, such as phases, outputs, deliverables, etc., but the scale or purpose of these goes beyond the immediate practical requirements in each. Lee’s criticism of Morgan’s (1983) project framework focuses on how it distinguishes between exercises and components and, whilst this is an important question, it does artificially focus the thing itself – not the thing in context. That is, there is not an objective project with objectively defined components – it is a dialogical in the sense defined by Freire, as necessarily contextualised by the student themselves (Freire, 1996). Tensions most often arise when such dialogue is not present.

In a project context there are varying and complex entities at play, usefully explored by educators by exploring the project brief itself (Sosa, 2020). In design studio, such issues are explored (constructed) by both students and tutors, and the negotiations students make with their project, time, tutor, resources, etc. is a critical component of the learning experience. This activity is both planned and unplanned because of its contingent nature, such as advising a student to do ‘smaller’ or ‘larger’ bits being entirely dependent on the circumstances. This setup is so ubiquitous and implicit in studio that it is rarely made explicit or even described. Hence, when transitions to distance and online modes were made, its loss was immediately felt.

What made this worse for some educators was that, in an online setting, it is often necessary to define distinctions such as activity, chunk, stage, phase, etc. to provide learning material at a functional level as well as ensuring the right ‘scale’ of experiences for students. For some educators, the emergency transition was their first experience of having to break down learning in such a way and it can feel unnatural to have to define (in advance) such learning if you are used to relying on their contingent application in studio. Creating suitable
'scales' chunks of learning at a distance requires experience as well as knowledge (Jones and Lotz, 2021).

3.3 Conceptions of time
What the examples above highlight is the limitation of only referring to the duality of synchronous and asynchronous. Both are essentially functional terms, referring to some specific feature of time. Neither captures the richness of time as experienced by students or tutors — a richness that we rely on in all studios but rarely acknowledge or articulate. Without this we would not have the stress of a deadline, reflective moments of simply staring at a blank page, or the complete loss of time felt when we are in flow.

Conceptions of time, such as chunking, align more with a Bergsonian view of time than any normative or operational one (Bergson, 2002). For Bergson, time had no meaning except as a function of human experience and phenomena. Extrinsic, objective measures of time (minutes, hours, days) can only ever relate to human experience in some artificial way. To put it succinctly, we do not experience a ‘hour of time’ — we experience ‘a boring lecture’ that happens to have been 60 minutes long. So familiar are we with conflating extrinsic measures of time that we can forget its experiential nature and, if it were possible to ‘see’ what an hour looks like in someone’s head, it will appear very different to the International System of Units quantity for time.

Regardless of the philosophy, there is a pragmatic and useful value considering time seen as an experience, not an extrinsic or universal metric. This does not preclude using ‘an hour’ or ’15 minutes’ — these are still valid symbols for time – but knowing they refer to an experience of time is more important and more useful. Perhaps we need to start with better words for how we use time in design education: and perhaps rethink the awkward and dualistic terms introduced during the pandemic.

4. Space
Like time, space is often considered in relatively simplistic terms, often referring to surfaces and superficialities. During the emergency teaching transition this was understandable since it is precisely these physical components that were unavailable, but it is the loss of affordance that is the real issue, not the surfaces themselves, and this is a far more complex conception of space than only its functional properties. Many educators had to confront the fact that spatial affordance cannot be understood or replicated in terms of surfaces and superficialities.

4.1 Proximate and Semi-Proximate
During the pandemic space was framed as proximities and, like time, through a dualities, such as ‘face-to-face’ / at a distance; proximate/distant, etc. Perfect or simplistic spatial proximities can be seen in some modes of didactic teaching, such as classroom or lecture theatre-based activity.
Exploring studio proximities

Figure 7. Proximate space, where all students are collocated in the same physical space at the same time.

In studio, however, such proximities are relatively rare and more often depend on arranged or semi-formal local organisation, usually (but not always) conflated with time-based synchronicities (e.g. student groupings, group tuition, formal assessment points, etc.). These could be considered semi-proximate space.

Figure 8. Semi-proximate space, where different students are collocated in the same physical space at different times, many of which coincide with planned or critical/key events.

This is very much the use of space we see in traditional studio settings, often aligning with synchronous and semi-synchronous conditions, hence proximity in both space and time is assumed in studio models. But what was highlighted during the pandemic was the fact that proximity, as defined only by spatial and temporal properties, was not enough to describe the types of engagement lost in the translation from traditional studio settings.

4.2 Social and other proximities

The use of the word ‘proximate’ has been conflated with surfaces, usually meaning physical and temporal proximity (i.e. being in the same place at the same time). This is because it’s simply easier to talk about the things that can be readily described or labelled: the surfaces,
time, people, stuff. Hence, proximity is very often considered only as physical (spatial or temporal) closeness. This tends to be exaggerated when we move online and are forced to use quite limited services and tools that tend to refer to function using surface terms. Very rarely do such tools employ conceptions or, even worse, when a conceptual metaphor such as ‘team’ is used, present functions that are antithetical to that metaphor in human terms.

Through such conflations we lose the real meaning of proximity, as highlighted by this quote from a design educator during the pandemic, describing an online tuition session: “We were synchronous but not proximate…”

“We were synchronous … …but not proximate”

Figure 9. Quote from online participant (tutor) describing an online design session with students.

This outlines a critical observation that many educators experienced: that people can be together at the same time but still remain distant and unconnected in particular ways. This is not simply lack of spatial or temporal proximity – if it were, the problems with asynchronous events outlined in the previous section would not be so marked. What was really lost was a relational proximity between people.

The most obvious example of this are social proximities: the networks connections, relations and networks created by and between students, some of which are superficially obvious in physically proximate studio settings. For example, how student cluster together based on connections they make, or the affordances to language that proximity offers through metalinguistics (body language and other non-verbal communications).

Figure 10. Social proximities are connections between students that may be independent of physical proximity, such as students in the same social group, as opposed to students in other groups.
Which we might consider to be **socially proximate space**.

![Socially-proximate space](image)

*Figure 11. Socially proximate can influence physical proximity (and vice versa), such as students in the same social groups choosing to be physically closer in other space (such as crits).*

Care has to be taken in overly conflating physical and social proximities: simply because social connections appear in proximate physical space does not mean there is a homogenous (or even causal) relationship. Human proximities depend on more than simply being in the same space at the same time. Students need a reason and motivation to create and maintain (or block) connections, and these are constructed socially through a complex range of interactions and assemblages (Chiu, 2010; Richburg, 2013; Ashton and Durling, 2016). The loss of such connections was reported regularly by educators in terms of loss of value (Marshalsey and Sclater, 2020; Wragg, 2020).

Even in strictly didactic studios, where highly structured teaching or demonstration is required (and where synchronicity and spatial proximity are critical to the pedagogy), there will still exist multiple dimensions of connection that transcend the structures imposed. For example, in a ballet studio engaging in a technical demonstration, there are still social and personal connections at play between students and teacher that influence, and are important to, the learning experience. These may be obvious as physical and temporal proximities but they also exist independently of them, depending on other proximities, such as those constructed through social dimensions.

This is all perhaps (obviously and trivially) true but the degree to which these ‘other’ proximities matter is only now becoming clear in research. Synchronicity and being in the same space are insufficient conditions to explain the myriad proximities that occur in studio, which are argued to be far better conceptualised as a complex ecology of proximities.

### 4.3 Conceptions of Proximity

Unfortunately, during the emergency teaching transition, the concepts and methods to translate proximities were not in place for everyone and many educators were forced to use purely functional language from traditional studio settings to describe requirements. For
many teachers, the use of synchronous online spaces was seen as a way of recreating proximate studio space. This often failed because the proximities needed were not temporal or spatial ones; they are human, affective and social connections.

Figure 12. Social proximity does not depend on physical or temporal proximity and a range of different social connections emerge in different spaces (e.g. in studio, exhibition or external social spaces) as well as over time (e.g. at beginning of courses, during crits, etc.)

Again, this has a similarity to a Bergsonian conception of time, where it is the ‘meaning of space’ that matters more than its functional description. People still refer to online rooms; homepages; breakout rooms; lobbies; public and private online spaces and what lies behind these symbols and references is the conception of space that people create, an idea articulated well by Gaston Bachelard (1984), influenced by Bergson, albeit using a different approach and even contradicting results (Perraudin, 2008)\(^\text{ii}\). This conceptualisation is primarily an embodied cognitive activity, based on our experience and memory and applied in other contexts. Such a translation is not simply symbolic or metaphorical: people do genuinely hold conceptions of space that are independent of the physical aspects of it (Jones, 2013). Hence, conceptual metaphors are useful in transferring both the functional and conceptual requirements of places of learning, not simply the surfaces and functions.

Again, it is the pragmatic rather than the philosophical position that is of relevance here – spatial metaphors and conceptions are an exceptionally useful way to conceive of online teaching because they are (or should be!) plural conceptual gestalts. That is, they are easy to share between people with common reference points but with sufficiently different individual imaginings to remain interesting and valuable.

5. Being

The final category is being and is also presented in the pragmatic sense of someone experiencing, engaging, acting, thinking, etc. in some context. There are worthwhile

\(^{\text{ii}}\) Perraudin is worth reading as a critique and synthesis of Bachelard’s criticism of Bergsonian time, however, for this paper, the focus remains on the uncritical experience of time in a pragmatic sense, contextualised in a teaching setting.
Explorations to be made in terms of purely philosophical being, but, as with time and space, exploring heuristic and practical language meaning is argued to be more useful in exploring studio teaching.

5.1 There, but not present
Let’s return to the educator quote introduced earlier and consider its meaning once again.

“We were synchronous … …but not proximate”

The word proximate is used here to refer to a closeness other than simply spatial or temporal nearness.

In any physical space we may be physically and temporally proximate but remain unconnected, and it is worth now asking what is it that is unconnected? For example, in an educational setting, any lecture will have varying degrees of attention paid to it by students (and possibly even the lecturer!). A student may be present at the same time (temporally proximate) and in the same space (spatially proximate), but we can still ‘be somewhere else’ in terms of attention or activity. In fact, the conceptual metaphor ‘to be somewhere else’ recognises that being, space and time may be interdependent and necessary conditions but are not necessarily sufficient for one another.

This, it is argued, is what is meant by the quotation above. Being present is to be engaged cognitively, emotionally, and/or bodily in space and time. Hence, not being present is to be disengaged, regardless of purely physical or temporal proximity.
Being present relates closely to an important theory in communications adapted to education: that of presence (Short et al., 1976; Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997). Put simply, presence is the idea that how we communicate also indicates (or projects) our ‘being’: that the artefacts of our communication (words, pauses, sighs, interactions, etc.) indicate aspects of ourselves as people. For example, the type of words we choose to communicate in an online message can also indicate some aspect of our personality or our state of mind at that time.

In a distance learning setting the idea of presence has perhaps obvious application (Munro, 1991) and has been extended to include social presence (Huang, 2017) and cognitive presence (Armellini and De Stefani, 2016), and can be usefully used to make a significant different to student success at a distance (Kear, 2010). Auther et al. (2020) have hypothesized the idea of design presence in virtual design studios, arguing that presence is the ‘performance of design identity’, after (Cheng, 1998). Further examples from different theoretical perspectives, can be found in dramaturgical analyses of studio (Karabulut and Merzali Çerikoglu, 2019), tribal rituals (Dannels, 2005). What they all highlight is that presence in the design studio is more complex than simply being in space at the same time.

5.2 Degrees of Presence
It is argued that presence can be usefully applied to traditional studio settings by relating presence to ‘being there’, as defined above. Traditionally, the expectation and assumption in studio is that it must be an active and interactive space where presence (being there) should be actively signalled and observed. But more recently the duality of present / not present has also been challenged, or, perhaps more accurately, the degree of presence has been explored in detail, revealing subtler ways of being in studio. Listening in (Rogoff et al., 2003), or the ‘apprenticeship of listening’ (Shulman, 2005), a form of legitimate peripheral learning
Exploring studio proximities (Lave and Wenger, 1991), is one good example of this less apparently active way of being in studio. Here, students are present but may not appear so.

![Diagram showing presence and interaction over time]

Figure 14. Being present is not only about visibility of action or interaction – less visible engagement, such as listening in, is also a form of presence.

These semi-proximate connections are critical to acknowledge because students who may seem to be less present are still very much active and interactive. Their overt interactions are simply less visible or obvious, making them harder to see and easier to ignore. By ignoring these ‘quieter’ students their voices are not only not heard but their presence can be invalidated and not recognised for the valuable learning experience and contribution it is. The importance of a crit, for example, is not only in the noises and actions made by the main contributors; the audience presence is critical to the activity as a social or semi-public form of communication (Dannels, 2005; Gray, 2013).

One lesson from the pandemic has been the change in student voices heard by teachers in online spaces; students they did not expect to hear from were suddenly vocal and contributors: “...more voices could be ‘heard’ through Post-Its than would have been possible in the physical studio with verbal questions” (Gray, 2021). This should be a warning that there are student voices that have not been heard in traditional studio settings and this is, at least in part, due to norms and expectations that have arisen in a particular form and culture of studio. Findings such as these have been identified in online and distance design studios (Lotz et al., 2015, 2019), highlighting the fact that the reality of presence(s) in any studio is far more complex than the traditional, homogenous view of synchronised space, time and presence.
Presence in studio is non-homogenous and varying degrees of presence create and arise from different proximities with different students engaging with different intensities in different studio modes. Recognising that presence can be signified to varying degrees and using multiple methods is critical to ensuring as many voices as possible are heard, broadening participation and inclusion for all students. At the very least, recognising that frequent, overt activity is not the only indicator of being present in studio is important.

### 5.3 Multiple presences

A further subtlety of presence is evidenced in the boundaries of studio and how connections (temporal or spatial) are created or maintained across these boundaries. An obvious example might be the social connections retained between students inside and outside of studio. The ubiquity and presence of social media has further challenged these boundaries, questioning the degree to which the traditional spatial and temporal proximities remain critical to maintain proximities in developing design expertise (Budge, 2013; Castro, 2019). Studio, as a purely physical and/or temporal space, might still be an important catalyst in the creation of these social proximities but it is not the only dimension along which they can be maintained, a key finding in distance design education (Lotz et al., 2015, 2018; Jones, 2020) that is argued to apply to traditional settings.
Students also bring their worlds and experiences into studio as part of their contiguous realities and being. Hence the boundary of studio is traversed regularly, meaning studio leaks out, and the outside comes in. Some would argue that this is a necessary part of studio (Brandt et al., 2013) and for Lave and Wenger it was critical to the formation of Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). More recently such crossings of boundaries have been normalised through the use of social media in and out of studio to access and merge with other online spaces. When a student is in studio but also in a virtual space, they are being in different places at the same time and contemporary design educators are bringing such proximities into the studio (Budge, 2013; Castro, 2019).

5.4 Conceptions of being

Like spatial and temporal relationships, connections through being and presence are non-homogenous and it is simply not the case that a student being physically in studio meaning means they are also present in the studio. As before, thinking of ‘being in studio’ in simplistic and singular ways means misses the complexity and value of other modes of being in studio.
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Figure 17. The full range of possible connections across time, space and being in studio present a complex picture of interactions and possibilities.

Hence, conceptualising being as more than the obvious and superficial markers can help develop better learning environments.

For example, this can be achieved by: recognising that voices heard in one mode may not be heard in another; understanding that being is more than body and that indicators of being present may not always be obvious; or by acknowledging that students’ being extends far beyond the limited horizon of studio and recognising students’ own identities and cultures can and will influence studio spaces.

Certainly, viewing physically present as the only valid mode of being in studio ignores other valid designerly experiences and ways of being, many of which they may already blend their presences in and out of studio. Again, the language used is perhaps insufficient to convey the experience and reality of ‘being in studio’ without resorting to technical or philosophical terms that are better explored heuristically or even experientially.

6. Summary

The ‘perfect’ studio is traditionally thought to be one where there is a confluence of space, time and being; Students and tutors, in the same space, at the same time, all engaging fully and being present.

Figure 18. Being in the same space at the same time is often assumed to be the perfect studio
Exploring studio proximities

The state of perfectly overlapping proximities rarely exists and, even when it does, the intensities and intersections are far less homogenous than shown above. This is evidenced in what happened for many educators during the pandemic: the loss of space.

![Diagram: space, time, being]

*Figure 19. The loss of physical proximity during the pandemic*

In response, many curricula attempted to make up for this by proxying space with time, forcing greater synchronicity in online spaces.

![Diagram: space, time, being]

*Figure 20. Compensating for loss of space by making heavy use of synchronous events*

This highlights some of the assumptions educators have made around space and time in studio and what was really missing was the focus on being: the fact that we use spatial and temporal proximities to create the proximities needed in studio: connections between tutors and students, students and students, serendipity, opportunity, social comparison, listening in, and all the ‘informalities’ that are the real stuff of studio. These have traditionally been informal, implicit and hidden because they have simply arisen from the spatial and temporal proximities our modes of studio depend on.

As many educators found during emergency teaching, physical proximity cannot be replaced only by synchronous proximity or vice versa. Appreciating proximity as more than physical and temporal proximity is both important in helping understand how student learn design in studio and useful in considering how we teach studio. It is perfectly possible do the ‘same’ thing at different times and in different spaces and still maintain other proximities. These other proximities may be conceptual, social, or experiential proximities, but what they all have in common is their human value. Hence, proximity has to be understood using its heuristic meanings: close, alike, near to, similar, etc.
As noted above, this aligns more with a view of time as a part of being as presented by Bergson or Bachelard, who, whilst they may have disagreed about the ontology of time, argued the critical importance of conceptions of time as human phenomena, ideas that would be picked up later in Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of embodied phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). What is common between these views of reality is the importance attached to meaning and value in human terms, not simply as a subjective addition to the objective matter, but as a necessary component of what it is. Setting aside the philosophical point here, at a very pragmatic level, thinking about the conceptions or values behind our measures of space, time, and even being, is argued to be far more useful to educators as a practical way to critically reflect on what we do and the assumptions we make about the basic ingredients of our realities.

1. Spatial and temporal proximities are insufficient

*Figure 21.* The complexity and richness of studio cannot be explained by only considering spatial and temporal proximities.

2. Social, phenomenal, aesthetic proximities matter

*Figure 22.* Social, phenomenal and aesthetic proximities are as important as spatial and temporal proximities.
3. Invisible proximities matter

Figure 23. All studios also exhibit a range of other ‘invisible’ proximities in addition to the more superficially obvious spatial and temporal proximities.

4. ‘Outside’ proximities matter

Figure 24. No studio exists in a vacuum and the proximities it has to contexts, as well as the individual ‘external’ proximities students bring, have an effect on the studio.
Figure 25. Putting it all together helps us realise the true complexity of studio as a complex ecology of praxis and certainly more than the sum of the individual parts.

7. References


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