

**BOYS, JOS. (2011). *TOWARD CREATIVE LEARNING SPACES: RE-THINKING THE ARCHITECTURE OF POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION*. NEW YORK, NY: ROUTLEDGE. PAGES: 194. PRICE: \$53.95 CDN, PAPER. ISBN 978-0415570640.**

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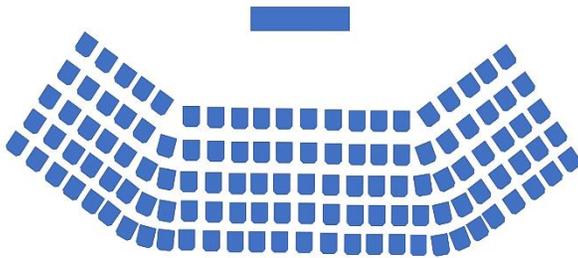


Figure 1

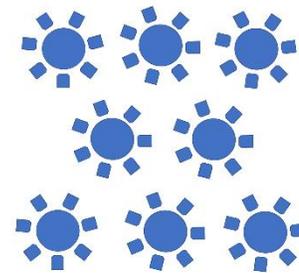


Figure 2

Conventional wisdom tells us that the instructor in Figure 1 will be lecturing and the students will be listening passively and perhaps taking notes, while the students in Figure 2 will be collaborating in small groups while the instructor facilitates active learning. The resulting assumption is that if we want to improve post-secondary teaching and learning, we need “more informal, flexible and social learning spaces” (Boys, 2011, p. 2).

As is often the case with conventional wisdom, it’s not so simple. Years of research in peer instruction (Mazur 1997; Mazur 2009; Crouch & Mazur, 2001), for example, has shown that the truism about the lecture theatre isn’t necessarily true, and research on active learning cautions instructors against treating student action and interaction in the classroom as a panacea (Prince 2004; Andrews, Leonard, Colgrove, & Kalinowski, 2011). What’s going on here?

Jos Boys’s *Toward Creative Learning Spaces* (2011) refers to such conventional wisdom as “myths, not because they are ‘wrong’ but because... we think *with* rather than *about*” them, flattening how we understand the notion of ‘learning spaces’” (p. 3). Boys wrote the book during her tenure as Senior Research Fellow of Learning Spaces in the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning through Design (CETLD), an initiative sponsored by the University of Brighton, the Royal College of Art, the Royal Institute of British Architects, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. She carefully unravels our assumptions and our go-to language by arguing that more important than the *physical spaces* for teaching and learning are the *conceptual spaces* of teaching and learning.

Take the notion of flexible learning spaces, for example—ubiquitous in describing classrooms with furniture on wheels. Boys asks,

if flexibility is actually about enabling different modes of teaching and learning, then surely this is an issue of changing educational methods rather than spaces? In fact, what is required is a better understanding of the range of existing and potential teaching and learning modes *in any particular situation*, as well as the particular spatial and architectural conditions which can support them. (p. 18; emphasis added)

Although the book's subtitle is *Re-Thinking the Architecture of Post-Compulsory Education*, it isn't about how to design effective classrooms. It's instead about the complexities of physical space and design; dwindling resources; flexibility and customizability; social processes and practices; comfort and discomfort (physiological, cognitive, and affective); situated rather than "obvious and generic" learning (p. 19); student misconceptions, confusion, and uncertainty; and informal learning in classrooms, formal learning outside of classrooms, and where we think where learning occurs. She also calls for the use of research methods that can capture some of these complexities (e.g., ethnography) to help us more fully understand what happens in "learning spaces."

What we need, she says, isn't examples of rooms and buildings that resolve these complexities as much as "proper research, creative methodologies and appropriate, constructive debate" (p. 170). She calls for "more 'meeting places' across and between different disciplines/communities of practice, both within post-compulsory educational institutions and beyond them" (p. 170), while also acknowledging that "we do not seem very good yet at learning from each other *about learning*" (p. 172). Yet.

The University of Calgary selected Boys as a keynote speaker for its 2016 Conference on Post-Secondary Learning and Teaching to mark the opening of the [new building](#) for the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning,<sup>1</sup> a \$40 million building with six learning spaces furnished with cutting-edge technologies and chairs, tables, whiteboards, and instructor stations that are all on wheels. The Taylor Institute hosts these learning spaces for instructors to experiment with their teaching for a day, a week, or a semester. The goal isn't to make them despair when they return to the classrooms across campus. Instead, it's to give instructors and students the experience of teaching and learning in a radically different classroom space in order for them to *experience teaching and learning in a radically different conceptual space*. This is the most important "learning space" on campus—portable, shareable, free, and far more impactful. These instructors and students then take these new conceptions back to the existing spaces across campus. This is the way real change starts to happen.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>i</sup> Boys will be returning to the University of Calgary's Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning for a series of consultations and conversations from June 14 through 16, 2017. Email [taylorinstitute@ucalgary.ca](mailto:taylorinstitute@ucalgary.ca) for more information.

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