

# Making Space: An inquiry into making space and how it impacts on the maker and learner.

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## Context

This paper reflects, and builds upon, my presentation given at Making Futures in 2015. It intends to capture personal learning from an inquiry into the making of 'the learning ecology' as Headteacher of Plymouth School Of Creative Arts. We refer to 'the learning ecology' as the dynamic manner in which space and inhabitants interrelate. We are a 3-16 years old all-through school created and sponsored by Plymouth College of Art. The school opened in September 2013 and is expanding year on year. We entered our new building, The Red House, designed by Feilden Clegg Bradley (FCB), in February 2015 and so this short paper reflects learning from the making of the space and our learning in how to use it.

The Red House is a place for making things. Making ideas, making technology, making art, for discovering how knowledge, values and language, identity or experience is made. This connects us as a group and reflects each individual's perspective, journey and relationship to their world.

Peter Clegg, in his excellent book, Feilden Clegg Bradley Learning from Schools (2016) highlights how school design has evolved over centuries in response to different stimulus, particularly political. At a time when Architects Journal highlights that 90 per cent of architects are concerned about the future of school design (Architects Journal 2015) FCB have shone light on a different path. This happened within the tightest of design timescales and budgets. FCB created a concept, responding to the design brief, as an amalgam of gallery, theatre and department store.

Over the past 20 years of my career, triggered by my experiences of working with students excluded from school, I have been fascinated by the impact of 'the space between our ears' and it's relationship to space in our physical world. Marcel Proust (1923) eloquently suggests, 'The real journey of discovery consists not of seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.'

This paper will respond to the following areas, based on a qualitative experience of making a school, with the purpose of providing a stimulus for future external research:

- How is the space a provocation for thinking, making and being different?
- How do we seek and benefit from difference?
- How can we facilitate the room to disappear?
- What's the significance of transparency?

### How is the space a provocation for thinking, making and being different?

The Red House is not only a school, from the sea it is a navigational aid! This quotation from the Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes of Holmes speaking to Watson seems more than fitting:

"Look at these big isolated clumps of buildings rising above the slates, like brick islands in a lead coloured sea."

"The Board Schools."

"Lighthouses my boy! Beacons of the future! Capsules with hundreds of bright little seeds in each, out of which will spring the wiser better England of the Future."  
Arthur Conan Doyle (1894)

As a teacher I have long held positive beliefs around team teaching and agile spaces. However, FCB helpfully pushed to the edge of the possible in my minds eye. They looked for one of the areas to be a single space for 180 students, I am so happy this was made. It has been fascinating to see how by designing open plan studio spaces that are larger than traditional classrooms a number of things have positively impacted on the learning and habits of staff and students. It has certainly provoked a different pedagogy and curriculum experience. It has challenged the way that teachers feel they should be in control. Such control tends to promote a process where students do not take responsibility for their learning and students relate to the teacher as the 'sage on the stage'. It fits well with spoon-feeding but not with student-led learning and not with an 'art college' ethos.

Students in many schools have to guess what is in their teacher's head rather than think for themselves. There are many things underpinning this but the space can challenge what we feel is possible. In a classroom of thirty students, teachers are able to maintain the illusion that they have control over what is happening. Rather than looking at having responsibility to students, teachers can often behave in a manner where they attempt the impossible of taking responsibility for them. This conflict stifles possibility. When there are 60 or 120 students in a studio space, the adults know that this control is no longer possible. It feels different. The pull for the past and familiarity of our comfort zone remains; even when we know it is not helpful or a good idea. Staff are initially likely to feel exposed in an environment where a mistake it is visible. Students expect this; staff do not. Staff may well then teach with an imaginary wall within the studio, using old practices in a new environment. However, as this won't work they are stimulated into moving past this. Staff often worry about stepping on each others toes, based on fears in their own heads, rather than the actual concerns of their colleagues. The magic happens when the adults finally relinquish control, not to other adults, but to the children. When you have a shared responsibility of sixty-four people, who are all learners and facilitators of learning you achieve a very different dynamic than two teachers being responsible for thirty children helped by two teaching assistants.



The Red House studios and school culture have resulted in students taking high levels of responsibility for their learning and hence being focussed and motivated. It has resulted in staff in rooms of sixty wishing they could connect to other studios by removing walls. It has required significant team effort and leadership to walk a different path. Habits are not always helpful and at times are based on something that is no longer relevant. The space can provoke an awareness of ourselves allowing us to take responsibility for our learning and behaviour.

### How do we seek and benefit from difference?

Difference in our studio ecology could be seen as an armature for creativity, making, discovering and performing. From a biological perspective difference is essential for survival. Without diversity we fail to evolve. Difference is fundamental for raising perspective and gaining curiosity. Having a studio instead of a classroom is a part of this. By space having a different name, a different feel and flow it creates a new expectation for both students and staff.

By having a larger open plan space it supports opportunities for specialist areas within a room that could not fit within a typical classroom. For example, we have kitchens in all our early years and primary years spaces. This facilitates a sense of homeliness and alters what is possible in the curriculum.

Without it being conscious, I believe that teachers tend to teach towards an imaginary version of themselves; to intuitively make sense of the activities that they plan and teach. We imagine learning happening based on our own experience of learning. Clearly though, when we all learn in different ways, this has some significant limitations. This is where a shared studio with multiple staff, different perspectives and preferences can provide a more rounded learning experience. The space also facilitates opportunities for us to play as a team, for individual expertise, passions and interests. I feel that our students gain both a sense of familiarity of key adults through this studio approach alongside the benefits of specialism. Familiarity is illustrated during staff absence where one adult being away does not unnerve the student when there are still many known faces and relationships.

Part of what helps us to actively seek difference is the importance of inquiry and questioning. Questions that move away from basic retrieval and those that help a student deepen their understanding and look at the world differently has great currency in our school. The open aspect of space and its connection to community supports the variety of questions. The agility and flow of space and furniture also allow the reconfiguring of the environment towards the purpose of the learning. Students and staff can ideally take responsibility within this.

It is important to understand that the learning ecology itself is dynamic. Difference can constantly be raised and utilised to enquire into ourselves and our world. This is fundamental in our beliefs around studio learning as we are not creating a new static model of education but one that regularly redefines itself. It's a way of learning to see with new eyes.

The term studio suggests making and art. The studios were designed with the belief that making and art should happen anywhere and throughout the day. The polished concrete floor and industrial aesthetic that reflects this belief. This is a distinctive part of our culture and space that sets us aside from a typical school.

### How can we facilitate the room to disappear?

Making is at the core of our school. Making can provide a 'hands on' or felt experience of my world. It is not a purely theoretical exercise. Making provides a wonderful opportunity for a very focussed state of attention. At the point when the learner is intrinsically motivated and they lose themselves in the making, it is as if the room literally disappears. This state is, I believe, optimal for breakthroughs in how we see our world and ourselves differently.



Visitors to the school provide very consistent pieces of feedback that the students are typically calm and focussed. This is exemplified during parent tours where groups of around twenty to thirty wander around the school and through the learning spaces. In most schools students would be distracted or disturbed by such happenings but in this space and with this curriculum something different occurs. Students rarely turn their heads. It is not, I believe, predominantly about not having doors but is connected to the process of making. Being in a large group of very focussed people is infectious.

It is interesting to note students who are typically impacted by sensory overload, such as those with a label such as Aspergers Syndrome, are rarely affected negatively by the open plan space. The focussed state of attention linked to making appears to alter the potential for visual and auditory distraction.

The opportunity to work alongside adults whilst making also supports students to engage with adults in a different manner than traditional didactic teaching. This again increases the chances for the student to reengage into a time when the room, once again, disappears.

### What's the significance of transparency?

The culture of space also has an impact and is a reflection of the learning ecology. The research of Daniels and Tse (2015) in [Feilden Clegg Bradley Learning From Schools](#) shows that the same environmental factor can be used in incredibly different ways. They conclude, 'Buildings alone do not transform practice. Transformation arises in the interplay between the two'. One environmental factor that is certainly noticeable in [The Red House](#) is transparency. In some schools this could be used for surveillance. At our school the transparency across spaces and across the school to the outside world is used to facilitate community and learning. Our schools transparency to the outside world is interestingly different. Several rooms are openly viewed to the street. This means that we connect differently to our community.

The transparency of space within [The Red House](#) has facilitated the most amazing personal and professional development. One teacher commented how, “I am no longer closing a door but constantly observed and observing.” As a result teachers will frequently highlight how they have picked up new skills, approaches and understanding through working alongside each other every day. Many staff have commented that this is the best professional development I have ever had. Staff have suggested how I am observed every day, so I have nothing to fear from observation or Ofsted. A part of this is achieved by working across an open-plan, transparent and supportive space where I can raise my awareness of what I can do differently so I can take responsibility. In the [Poetics of Space](#), Gaston Bachelard (1994), states, ‘To use a magnifying glass is to pay attention, but isn’t paying attention already having a magnifying glass? Attention by itself is an enlarging glass.’ I can therefore see in the studio that this transparency provides a potential stretch out of my comfort zone as I broaden my perspective of where the horizon exists.



## Conclusion

The impact and relationship to space is not new. As Reggio Emilia suggests, based on the informative work of Loris Malaguzzi, the environment is the third educator. Feilden Clegg Bradely [Learning from Schools](#) (Clegg 2016) highlights the positive impact of FCB design on standards. Our experience is that the relationship between people, the process of making and transparent studios has a wider and more holistic impact beyond academic standards. We would now welcome the chance to develop external research to evidence this. Watch this space and be curious about how we see the world through new eyes in [The Red House](#).

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