Places of Agency

How where we learn supports student empowerment, choice, and freedom

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Freshman engineering class at Olin College (Photo by Ela Ben-Ur).

Schools are dedicated to human development and learning. To achieve this, educators must create *places* –physical settings of spaces, objects, and materials for meaning-making – that support the psychological conditions for learning (Wilson et al., 2024). Such conditions include a student's sense of safety and motivation. Underpinning these is a fundamental assumption: that the place of learning enables *agency*. Developing knowledge and practices require feeling able to have ideas and act upon them (Bandura, 2001, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students must have some degree of freedom to act and think. Without some control of their experience, feelings of powerlessness and incapability conspire against feeling safe, motivated, and learning anything new (Gresalfi et al., 2009). Rather than schools as places that take control away from students –or worse, generate feelings of coercion –how can educators and designers create places that enable empowerment, engagement, freedom, and choice?

Over the past year, researchers at the Designing Learning Places (DLP) Lab at Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero have reviewed a range of research literature about how places support or undermine a sense of agency. We identified, read, and compared dozens of articles and chapters from education, architecture, psychology, sociology, and urban design. What follows are key themes that emerged as we reviewed and discussed the literature. In sum, places cultivate agency by offering people choices *of where to be, what to do,* and *how to change the place to better suit their needs*. As educators seek to create places of learning, we invite them to consider how their spaces, materials and objects reflect the following qualities.

Reachable & Open

Agency is supported in places that have materials, objects and spaces are easily findable, accessible and conveniently available for learners to use (Hancock, 2023; Hassen & Kaufman, 2016). *Reachability* is a quality of places that offer obvious options and opportunities for accessing resources with minimal obstacles. For example, when we cannot see where things are stored or have views into other areas, they are not easily reachable. In contrast, glass doors on a storage closet or windows into adjacencies create easier access. Many early childhood learning places are often designed with reachability in mind: paper, glue, pencils, books, and myriad other materials are often easy for young learners to find and use. For older students, libraries and maker spaces support agency through ensuring resources are easy for students to locate and access.   Freshman engineering classes at Olin College emphasize agency by creating places

Students at International School SEK Cuidalcampo (Madrid, Spain) have easy access to portable carts to select materials and tools.

rich with materials, objects and tools that are freely available for action.

Relatedly, research suggests the importance of *openness* in supporting access (Moonkham & Duff, 2022; Rands & Gansemer-Topf, n.d.; Wronski et al., 2023). Open places have few walls or visual obstacles which enable things to be visually found and areas to be known and freely explored. Notice how the engineering class at Olin has very few visual obstacles. This allows quick scanning and locating resources for use. The Fuji Kindergarten in Tokyo is designed as an oval with no fixed interior walls, allowing for visual access to the school and multiple paths through its areas. Outdoor learning places, like gardens, parks or forests offer wide and open expanses to explore (Kangas et al., 2014). As opposed to closed places that limit choices and routes, open places offer multiple ways to freely explore. There is no one way to be and flow through the place. Together, reachability and openness are hallmark qualities of places of agency.

Sometimes there are, of course, safety reasons to keep materials inaccessible or close off access to areas for privacy. However, bear in mind that restricting outdoor access, limiting student movement, or controlling learners'

Tezuka Architects' open design of the Fuji Kindergarten in Tokyo allows for visual access to the community and multiple routes of flow through the spaces.

attention undermines agency. Sometimes educators must create such limits in moments to ensure student safety or keep a class in order. But know that physical barriers, confinement, or restricting social interactions can exacerbate feelings of isolation, passivity, and apathy (Engstrom & Van Ginneken, 2022). This is made worse when we deprive others of connections to the natural world, ultimately contributing to a diminished sense of connection and engagement. For example, research suggests the absence of natural elements in prisons, including windows, natural light, and access to nature, significantly impacts inmate well-being, fostering a sense of disempowerment; the deprivation of natural elements not only affects inmates' mood but also inhibits their sense of agency by constraining their connection to the external world (Wener, 2012).

Movable & Flexible
Places that support agency have objects, materials and spaces that are reconfigurable and movable in flexible ways. At Olin College, the chairs, desks, and materials such as foam core and sticky notes can be relocated. A resource cart at SEK Cuidalcampo is portable. Glass partitions at the Fuji Kindergarten are places in which furniture or walls can be moved, objects can be relocated or the space itself can be easily rearranged to suit changing

A moveable nook at International School SEK El Castillo in Spain is used in multiple ways throughout the day as a reading nook, rest area, and play space.

community needs (Hancock, 2023; Oliveras Ortiz et al., 2020; Rands & Gansemer-Topf, n.d.; Reinius et al., 2021). Tables on wheels, movable shelves, folding walls, and resource carts are a few examples of moveable qualities of a place that supports agency.

While movability is an important quality of the objects in a place, flexibility points to the multiple uses of the place itself. Is it designed for just one use? Can learners repurpose it and its elements for other uses? For example, perhaps a stairway also doubles as an impromptu sitting spot. Or a stool creates a small surface for a group to sit around on the floor. Flexible places empower learners to choose how to use their environment differently to support their emerging needs (Montgomery, n.d.; Westlake, 2019; Wright et al., 2021).   For example, learners at the k-8 grade Green School in Paar, South Africa have a wide range of ways they can use their classrooms. Designed by GASS Architects, these

The k-8 Green School in Paarl, South Africa features flexible classrooms that can be used in a variety of ways (photo by Wieland Gleich – ARCHIGRAPHY).

places encourage choices to rearrange their elements to support moments of community presentation, small group discussion or independent activities. While some elements are movable (e.g., tables, chairs, pillows, etc.), the place is not determining a singular use. Instead, it offers learners choices for multiple uses. Such versatility of place creates a sense of ownership that is critical to feeling safe, comfortable, and ready to learn.

It is important to note that fixed, rigid, and depersonalized places undermine agency. Unchangeability restricts freedom and risks creating disempowerment, stress, and passivity. Inflexible spaces are pre-determined and can diminish learner's ability to focus and contribute to a sense of helplessness. Overall, designers and educators should keep in mind that movability and flexibility are in response to many rigid designs of learning places that are often linked to distress, hopelessness, and lack of control over one's experience (Swensen, 2015; Engstrom & Ginneken, 2022; Wronski et al., 2023).

Varied & Adjustable
Finally, places of agency offer a range of different types of chosen experiences. While reachable & open speaks to the access affordances of a place, and movable & flexible

Students at the Vittra Telefonplan school in Hägersten, Sweden have a wide array of places in which they can choose to use during their day.

Lebaron Hall at Iowa State University seats 360+ and offers swivel seats that allow students to turn and talk easily with one another.

speaks to its reconfigurability, varied & adjustable speaks to the range of different spaces, objects, and materials and how they can be tailored to suit individual needs. Does a place have diverse shapes and forms or contrasting materials to touch? Variation describes the diversity of functional and sensorial elements in a place, such as a variety of different lighting, seating, displays and exterior/interior views. Such places have communal and private areas, inside and outside areas, or formal and informal learning settings. Sweden's Vittra Telefonplan School, designed by Rosan Bosch, offer students a provocative mixture of settings from which to choose – including enclosed rooms for privacy, reading nooks, and presentation spaces. Different geometrical forms, lighting elements and materials provide a diversity of sensorial experiences for students to select and use. It provides learners with choices that influence their experience depending on their needs and goals.
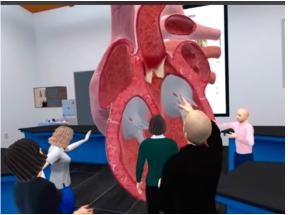
Moreover, such places invite participants to control and change their stimuli, increasing some or minimizing other stimuli in their environment. Some settings might have easy ways for learners to adjust or turn on/off a reading light, open a window if they are too hot or cold, increase or decrease sound so they can better focus, or close curtains to create privacy for reading (Hancock, 2023; Moonkham & Duff, 2022; Rands & Gansemer-Topf, n.d.; Swensen,

2015; Wright et al., 2021; Wronski et al., 2023). Adjustability can be seen in furniture that allows students can change their posture, height and viewing focus. Even large lecture halls can be redesigned with agency in mind. The University of Iowa's 364 seat Lebaron Hall offers students seats that swivel, enabling them to shift comfortably and collaborate with other students.   Adjustability focuses on how the place invites and empowers learners to tailor their experience.

While adjustability might be a challenge in some built environments, it is affordance of many digital or virtual places. Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) integration enables customization of acoustics, lighting, views, and movement. Michael B. Horn, co-founder of the Clayton Christensen Institute, envisions the future classroom as a 'learning studio,' designed for various activities—either individual tasks through digital media or small interactive group sessions. Horn anticipates a departure from traditional classrooms, proposing that each student will start their day with a personalized work plan (Hudson & White, 2020). Furthermore, VR technology enables students to immerse themselves in subjects like science, history, art, and geography. Students can manipulate objects, view them from various angles, and understand their functions in real time. This provides unique educational experiences, allowing students to explore in ways that are simply

Students at Reddam House School in England learning about the human heart through interactive VR

impossible is the physical world, such as close investigation of the human heart or interact with an extinct wholly mammoth (Cimerman, 2023).

Whether digital or physical, places that undermine agency restrict power of changing one's stimuli. Such places dictate silence, extreme temperatures, lack of color, or sensory overload (Engstrom & Van Ginneken, 2022; Wener, 2012; Wronski et al., 2023). These features can contribute to feeling overwhelmed or under-stimulated. Uncontrolled sensory overload or deprivation fosters feelings of isolation and heightens stress levels (Fairweather, 2000). Extreme temperatures and a lack of color contribute to an environment that is disengaging and disempowering, further reinforcing feelings of helplessness. For example, in prison environments, regimented sensory environments are characterized by limiting stimuli, such as requiring stark silence, restricted social interactions, and lack of connections to nature. These unpleasant sensory experiences contribute to disempowerment and increased anxiety (Fairweather, 2000; Bass, 2020).

Agency, Place and Pedagogy
As educators, we aim to create powerful learning experiences in which learners develop new ideas, beliefs, and ways of being in the world. Our effectiveness depends on how well we create key psychological conditions that support learning. Here is where place is our powerful ally. The quality of where we learn influences a variety of conditions for learning, such as safety, connection, and agency. Places can help learners feel more empowered or may risk exacerbating student apathy and disconnection. The ideas and examples in this paper invite all educators to consider how spaces, objects and materials can better develop students' sense of empowerment, freedom, and choice.

As you ponder these ideas and begin to identify ways your place might better support agency, let us end with an important caveat. A learning place is only as powerful as the social practices within it. While place is important, what we *do* in the place (and with all that it offers) is essential. The social practices of teaching and learning, or *pedagogy*, matter. Our pedagogy must work together with place to best leverage what it has to offer. Reachable and open resources matter little if there is no practice of using them. Moveable and flexible elements will be wasted if we don't allow students choices of what and how to learn. The value of offering a variety of spaces or elements is lost if students are not given opportunities to lead their own learning.

Every learning place has pedagogical processes shaped by educators' beliefs. Amidst all the pressures of covering content and grading, we must believe that cultivating student agency is important. And agency is cultivated in places that offer reachable objects, openness, choices of movement, reconfigurability, and a variety of options. Such qualities of a learning place effectively support agency only if we invite students to have the power to shape their learning experience.

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