Engaging in Spaces

How mature distance students fit study into their homes and lives

Ella R. Kahu

School of Psychology, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand
e.r.kahu@massey.ac.nz

RHETORIC

> *"you simply study when, where and how you want"*
>
> *University website*

Distance study, alongside increasing use of technology, is said to overcome the barriers of space and time. To fit study into complex lives, a third of mature aged (over 24 years) tertiary students in New Zealand study by distance (Ministry of Education, 2011). But space and time must still be found and blurring the physical boundaries between study and home creates new challenges. Few studies have looked at physical spaces, yet the availability of appropriate learning spaces determines not just when and where students study, but also the quality of their engagement. Students are advised to set up a quiet separate study area in their home. But is that possible? Is it always the best option?

RESEARCH

How do distance students manage their learning spaces in the context of their family?

- Nineteen first year distance students aged over 24; diverse in age, family status, ethnicity, and location.
- Semi structured interviews with students and their families at the start of the semester focussing on preparation, expectations, and motivation.
- Weekly Skype video diaries throughout the semester talking about their study experiences and what was influencing their study.
- Follow up interviews including families after semester ended.
- Thematic analysis identifying the influences on student engagement.

REALITIES

An Appropriate Space
Students thought they knew what an appropriate space was – isolated and quiet. But that wasn't always possible and it didn't always work. Some liked background noise and some disliked being isolated. Many were torn between their own preferences and university advice. Access to technology was important.

> *You have to experiment with study to find what works for you.*

> *I didn't like feeling isolated, which it kind of should be for study ... it was an unconscious struggle between where I wanted to be and where I felt like I was supposed to be*

Supporting Space
A key influence on the choice of strategy, and therefore the access to quality learning spaces, was support from family. Some partners prioritised the study and enabled space, while others were frustrated by the impact that study had on their lives.

> *Just give them all the space they need for their study, support them, you will tend to know when they are engrossed in their study and not to disturb them.*

> *It does kind of restrict, in that I can't just go to the piano and play because I know he finds the noise distracting.*

> *I did manage to sit in the hospital cafe and, in the 2.5 hours she was in surgery, I think I got 800 words done. It wasn't good so quite a lot of it got rewritten.*

A Shared Space
The home is not a dedicated learning space. As well as being shared with other people, it was also associated with different roles – parenting, domestic chores, and relaxation – and these roles impacted on the ability to study. Technology too was shared with family and access had to be negotiated.

> *You're in that relaxed state, if that makes sense, you're in your, at home, … so I think that's why, I got probably most of my good work done, actually at work.*

> *I found the gym was a really good place to study because I'm not sitting at home, I'm not looking at my massive washing pile going, s**t I need to fold that.*

Managing Space
Students used three strategies: Temporal separation, studying when home was empty, gave quality space but relied on time in the family schedule. Physical separation, hiding away or studying out of the home, depended on support from others. Dovetailing, weaving study alongside other roles and tasks, relied less on other people but gave poorer quality space.

> *I didn't want [the children] to be disadvantaged. So three o'clock came, all study stopped.*

> *Because [work] will be quiet, because there will be no one there and there is a proper computer to use.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The quality of learning spaces that students can access impacts on their ability to engage deeply with their study. The ideal space lies at the intersection of three, sometimes competing, demands. But this is a learning curve – students need to experiment to find ways that work for themselves, their study, and their family. While this is the students' responsibility, the university can help:

- Current advice is simplistic and generic. Rather than being told simply to set up a quiet separate study, students should be told of the specific challenges they may face, and possible solutions they could try.
- Target support services for mature aged distance students to enable these students to connect with each other and to discuss and share ideas on the challenges of finding space and time to study.

Study
Discipline
Technology
Assessments
Task

Ideal conditions to engage

Self
Lifeload
Preferences
Expectations
Priorities

Family
Children
Partner
Priorities
Support

Ministry of Education. (2011). Education counts. Retrieved 12 July, 2012, from http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiary_education