

# From 'ideals' to the 'everyday': Reimagining futures of hybrid higher education spaces

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## Abstract

*This conceptual paper engages with the complexities of hybrid learning spaces in contemporary higher education. It conceptualises these spaces as dynamic, socially constructed, and materially entangled practices within the postdigital university. The paper responds to dominant discourses of digital transformation that depict this change primarily as a technical adjustment rather than a pedagogical or cultural process, often overlooking the complexities of everyday pedagogical practice. Central to this approach is a postdigital perspective that highlights the entanglement of human and digital elements in everyday life, rendering binary distinctions between 'online' and 'in-person' increasingly irrelevant. Framed through the geographies of collaboration, informed by spatial and sociomaterial perspectives, the paper positions hybrid learning spaces as evolving, unfinished, and fluid. Mapping these geographies provides both a methodological and conceptual tool to trace how relational, material, and digital configurations unfold across scales and temporalities, revealing tensions as well as possibilities within hybrid higher education. The paper aligns with the view that current educational narratives—particularly those centred on 'transformation'—often obscure the contradictions and messiness of actual pedagogical practice. Such narratives tend to portray universities and academic staff as fundamentally flawed and in need of wholesale reform, while overlooking the situated practices that sustain education on a daily basis. By foregrounding the profane acts in education—the ordinary, material, and lived practices of students, educators, and institutions—this paper repositions hybridity not as a product of technological innovation alone, but as a process of continuous negotiation in which ideals, contradictions, and everyday realities converge. Finally, the paper acknowledges the notion of futures-in-the-present to highlight how imagined futures already shape current educational configurations. Within this view, higher education does not move towards a single, predetermined future but unfolds through multiple, contested futures embedded in everyday practices. Thus, it proposes that hybrid, collaborative learning spaces should be understood not as endpoints of design but as unfolding sites of possibility, shaped by diverse learner trajectories and emergent educational relations. Taken together, the paper contributes to recent theoretical debates on space, practice, and technology in networked learning and offers a conceptual foundation for reimagining hybrid higher education as inclusive, socially responsive, and future-oriented.*

## Keywords

*Collaboration, Higher Education, Hybrid Learning, Learning Space, Postdigital*

## Introduction

In higher education (HE), long-standing assumptions about learning spaces are increasingly called into question. The traditional boundaries between online/on-campus or physical/digital, have become blurred, reshaped by sociotechnical transformations and global crises. While physical presence on campus remains central to many higher education institutions, the persistence of exclusively non-digital models appears unlikely (De Caro-Barek & Stöckert, 2024). As universities are urged to adapt their educational offerings in response to sustainability goals and increasing demands for equal access and flexibility, the *hybridity of HE spaces* emerges not simply as a technical response but as an opportunity to reimagine educational spaces as inclusive, sustainable, and future-oriented (Pöysä-Tarhonen, 2025, in press).

A key challenge lies in moving beyond narrow conceptions of the digital that treat technology as a separate entity. A *postdigital* perspective is particularly valuable here as it foregrounds the entanglement of human and digital elements in everyday life, rendering binary distinctions between 'online' and 'in-person' increasingly irrelevant (Gravett, 2024). Rather than marking a time *after* the digital era, the prefix 'post' signals a condition in which the digital is pervasive—often noticed only in its absence (Gourlay, 2025). Yet, this perspective calls for greater

conceptual precision in addressing the embodied and material practices of education, acknowledging that ‘digital–physical’ relations are more complex than any model of seamless integration implies (Gourlay, 2025). Moreover, the quality of a learning space cannot be defined by materiality alone; the factors that make a place conducive to learning (or contrarywise) also emerge through sentiments and relationships (e.g. Lamb & Carvalho, 2024). In parallel, global policy frameworks increasingly position collaboration as central to reimagining educational futures, highlighting its importance in addressing complex, interconnected challenges. In HE, this involves fostering students’ capacity to act collaboratively, ethically, and with a sense of collective responsibility (Makoe, 2024). Yet education is frequently idealised as an ‘utopian space’, promising intellectual flourishing and societal transformation (Rüsselbæk Hansen & Phelan, 2022). While it is unquestionable that education must evolve in response to, and in dialogue with, societal transformations and the pressing challenges confronting humanity (Gourlay, 2025), the so-called ‘educationalization’ risks obscuring the messy and contradictory realities of practice (Fendler, 2018).

This conceptual paper contends that a more generative approach is to foreground the *profane acts in education*—the ordinary, material, and lived practices of students, educators, and institutions—rather than abstract or idealised visions (Rüsselbæk Hansen & Phelan, 2022), and to bring these into dialogue with *futures-in-the-present* (Lindberg & Johansson, 2023). Within this view, the paper conceptualises hybrid spaces not as fixed or perfected, but as evolving and unfinished, where ideals, practices, and limitations are continuously negotiated. To further theorise these spaces, the paper draws on the *geographies of collaboration* (Pöysä-Tarhonen, 2025), informed by spatial and sociomaterial perspectives. As such, this frame offers a valuable lens through which to reconceptualise hybrid spaces as fluid, situated, and relational within the postdigital university.

## Hybrid, collaborative learning spaces in the postdigital university

In HE, hybrid learning spaces represent more than technical arrangements: they embody distinctive conceptualisations, theories, and practices that integrate diverse modalities of learning. Here, hybridity is characterised by the interweaving of formal and informal, structured and unstructured, physical and digital dimensions (Hilli et al., 2019), foregrounding networks of people, practices, and technologies over discrete delivery modes—constituting a complex sociomaterial arrangement (Eyal & Gil, 2022). Through a postdigital lens, hybridity captures the embedded, and dynamic interplay between human and digital elements (Gourlay, 2021), as students and educators traverse spaces, tools, and networks, negotiating shifting relationships and temporalities. As such, hybrid learning spaces call for a rethinking of education not as modality-bound, but as relational and materially entangled.

### Hybrid as fluid

Philosophically, hybrid spaces can be understood as fluid: their boundaries shift and adapt to changing configurations of people, technologies, and environments (Eyal & Gil, 2022). However, capturing this fluidity is challenging due to the absence of clear markers (Eyal & Gil, 2022). This fluidity centres the learner, whose choices shape the crossing of boundaries. Yet students’ engagement is not uniform, reminding us that hybridity involves diverse capacities and experiences (Mineshima-Lowe et al., 2023). Understanding hybrid learning spaces thus requires critical attention to how students curate their learning across intersecting perspectives, technologies, activities, and time. While digital technologies are already woven into many aspects of teaching and learning, it follows that educators’ roles have also become ‘hybrid’. In considering the hybridity of spaces and the futures of HE, it is therefore important to focus not only on students but also on the evolving roles of educators (Markauskaite et al., 2023).

### ‘Geographies of collaboration’ as multi-scalar lens for hybrid, collaborative spaces

To better understand hybrid, collaborative learning spaces in HE, this paper draws on the geographies of education (Taylor, 2009). This approach enables us to identify the blurring boundaries between different modalities of online and on-campus learning. It can reveal geographical differences (Brooks et al., 2012) that show how students and educators navigate various modalities or demonstrate how educational spaces can shape and facilitate relationships of many kinds (Hackett et al., 2018). This frame incorporates three strands of spatial and sociomaterial thought that conceptualise learning spaces as dynamic, socially constructed, and materially entangled which, due to their inherently social and process-oriented nature, are particularly well-suited to examining the blurring boundaries of fluid, collaborative learning spaces in this context (Pöysä-Tarhonen, 2025). The following three perspectives inform this view. *First*, space is theorised as socially constructed—an evolving

product of social relations and material practices (Massey, 2005). From this perspective, space is dynamic—an evolving outcome of interactions, a realm of simultaneous diversity, constantly evolving, and embedded in material practices. *Second*, sociomaterial sensitivities reveal how human and nonhuman actors—bodies, technologies, artefacts, and ideas—co-constitute educational practices, with hybrid learning seen as a temporary accomplishment shaped by shifting material and social entanglements. In this view, the concept of mobilities (e.g. Bayne et al., 2014) further elucidates how movements of people, artefacts, and information interconnect and reshape educational spaces. *Third*, attention to embodiment (Hackett et al., 2018) underscores how diverse actors experience space through movement, presence, and interaction, whether in physical or online encounters. Here, a body is regarded as an entity within a space, forming the foundation for experiencing the various dimensions, aspects, dynamics, and properties of space. Together, these different perspectives offer a multi-scalar lens for examining how hybrid, collaborative spaces are enacted across temporalities and perspectives—from momentary coordination of individual actors to the long-term shaping of collective practices and ‘cultural’ memories.

## Profane acts and the futures of hybrid higher education

Aforementioned, educational discourse—particularly concerning digital technology—is often shaped by dominant narratives of ‘transformation’ (Gourlay, 2025). Whether framed through innovation rhetoric, employability imperatives, or sustainability goals (Rüsselbæk Hansen & Phelan, 2022), such narratives frequently position the university as an institution in need of reform, casting present practices as outdated or insufficient (Gourlay, 2025). While these visions hold strategic and policy significance, they risk obscuring the messy, contradictory, and situated realities of everyday educational life (Fendler, 2018). To resist this abstraction, this paper foregrounds what Rüsselbæk Hansen and Phelan (2022) term the ‘profane acts in education’. These are the ordinary, material, and relational practices that comprise the lived experience of learning and teaching. This perspective allows to shift attention from ideals to immanence—from what education should be, to how it is actually enacted. This does not imply a rejection of visionary thinking but an insistence on grounding those visions in the realities of practice. In this way, futures are not distant goals but are continually negotiated and enacted through futures-in-the-present (Lindberg & Johansson, 2023; Wilson et al., 2025). This orientation further recognises that HE does not move towards a single, predetermined future but unfolds through multiple, contested futures that emerge within the everyday practices of students, educators, and institutions.

## Concluding remarks

The argument presented here contributes to understanding hybridity in HE as a sociomaterial and spatially complex phenomenon. These reframing challenges prevalent discourses that still treat hybridity as a mode of delivery or a temporary solution to crisis. As hybridity becomes a defining feature of HE, there is a need to move beyond reductive understandings of hybrid learning spaces as merely flexible or efficient configurations. Instead, this paper highlights these spaces as unfinished, relational, and materially entangled. By foregrounding the profane acts of education, a hybrid, collaborative space in HE is reimagined not only in terms of what it enables but also in terms of how it is lived. This requires recognising the spatial ‘politics’ at play, and challenging narratives that overlook the messy, negotiated, and plural nature of educational practice. In reimagining the futures of HE, then, there is a need to remain attentive not only to ideals and innovations but to the realities and contradictions of everyday academic life. It is in these spaces—in the tensions between policy and practice, design and improvisation, aspiration and fatigue—that futures-in-the-present are enacted.

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