

Exploring Hybrid Learning Formats in a Nordic Master's Programme in Visual Studies and Art Education

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Abstract

This paper reports from a project in progress that aims to develop a hybrid learning format that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate collaborative situations between students and teachers on two campuses and in collaborative situations off-campus. The project explores a current co-teaching opportunity that AAU and Aalto University are facing due to the start-up of the new Nordic joint degree master's program Visual Studies and Art Education (NM NoVA). A new physical space has been established at the AAU Copenhagen campus, that digitally facilitates a video-mediated, synchronous learning environment and a similar facilitation is accessible at Aalto University. Teachers and researchers join into a collaboration and conduct the project drawing theoretical knowledge generated in the field of synchronous learning formats and from research in the particular subject related field of digital technology and visual arts education. Furthermore, the project uses the participants' practical experience from engaging in different synchronous learning formats shared and informed by discussions with peers. Inspired by Design-Based Research (DBR), researchers actively engage in the problem analysis, design, implementation, and analysis of the hybrid learning format. Rich descriptions of the program's evolution are obtained through participant observations, interviews, and a "photo-safari" capturing interactions among students, teachers, and technology.

Analytically, the study explores the hybrid format as an enactment of space beyond geographical constraints, drawing inspiration from the concept of "apparatus" within new materialism. Three analytical themes emerge: knowledge-building practices, community-building practices, and longitudinal aspects, providing insights into how the hybrid format impacts collaboration, engagement, and the evolution of educational spaces. Preliminary findings reveal the diverse orientations and pedagogical discussions that emerge within these hybrid spaces, challenging the traditional notion of a "third space" and paving the way for new conceptualisations. The project anticipates further exploration of interdependencies within third spaces and the dynamics of student and teacher bodies within this evolving educational landscape.

Keywords

Hybrid learning, higher education, plural spaces, problem-based learning, art-based methods

Introduction

What happens when trying to transcend students' and teachers' two-campus experiences of synchronous online teaching situations by developing a hybrid learning format in higher education? This question is not new and has a history of 20 years. A common feature of video-mediated synchronous practice is that it offers interpersonal presence between participants. According to a review by Raes et al (2020), this interpersonal presence is often distinguished between *hybrid remote classrooms* in which students are physically present at each end of an online connection, and *hybrid virtual classrooms* in which students attend a physical class via an online connection from wherever they are located. The technical setup of our project follows the former. From a pedagogical perspective, Eyal and Gil (2022) argue that pedagogical practices and participation in such settings may be often limited to what is possible to do in a classic lecture situation where the technical installations determine the teacher's and students' pedagogical possibilities. To overcome these limitations, we follow Eyal and Gil's (2022) conceptualization of *hybrid teaching as a space of merging interactions* that approaches learning environment as "a combination of mobile, social, and physical components that learning becomes anchored in a context of social meaning" drawing on insights from Dewey (1976) and Wenger (2000). This, we believe, offers possibilities to include and further develop problem-based learning, art-based methods, case-based projects, group work and cross campus collaboration beyond a classic lecture setup.

Taking these insights into account and being situated in the pragmatic circumstances of what is possible to realise in an institutional setting, this project aims to establish a learning environment that is flexible enough to support the particular program content and accommodate art-based and problem-based collaborative situations between students and teachers on the two campuses at Aalborg University and Aalto University. The purpose is to make a technical and practical reconfiguration of two physical spaces that serve the educational goals of a new Nordic Master's program in Visual Studies and Art Education (NM NoVA) and physical rooms that are equipped accordingly. Unlike most international double-degree programs, NM NoVA's curriculum is fully co-developed and co-taught by the partner universities. This allows the program to offer a coherent study path for students who are required to study in two universities as well as makes it possible for faculty to actively share content expertise and pedagogical knowledge throughout the curriculum. Being two entities separated by geographical distance and connected by digital technologies, we found a practical challenge of providing a learning environment emerging from pedagogical ideas of student driven practices and problem-based learning.

Our research interest is to generate new knowledge about the different and diverse practices that the hybrid format offers and understand more about how learning spaces emerge among higher education students involving aesthetic practices when they are in a hybrid environment. Thus, the current project took the pedagogical ideas of the master's program NoVA as the driving force for the development of a concrete learning space that re-centres pedagogy in hybrid learning formats. This included articulating learning design principles of creative problem solving, developing art-based methods, utilising case-based projects, and creating collaborative group work as a common thread through the program.

The project expects to deliver new knowledge of potentials and challenges derived from an empirical study of hybrid learning format. A particular focus is on how student collaboration is enacted and performed revolving around hands-on activities that require the use of physical artefacts such as analogue sketching, mock-ups, and prototyping that are shared and discussed between students/ students/teachers on campuses, across campuses and off campuses.

Setting the scene: The case of the Nordic Master's in Visual Studies and Art Education (NoVA)

Acting as a research context for exploring hybrid learning formats across learning contexts, the project is situated around the outset and unfolding of the new NoVA programme (<http://www.nordicmaster.org/>).

The program is developed jointly by two partner universities: Aalto University and Aalborg University in Copenhagen (AAU) and is based on a solid and long-term collaboration between the two universities. All students admitted to NoVA start at one of the two partner universities, where they take the first and second semester and shift to the other university in the third and fourth semester.

The partner universities collaborate on the content and organising, but also on the delivery of the program organised as co-teaching activities between the two campuses using digital equipment to create a learning community between the teachers and students across the physical locations. The purpose is to support the facilitation of a learning environment where all participants experience a shared presence in a shared space throughout their education – despite the geographical distance.

As a way of structure, the teaching is organised in online, offline, and blended learning formats, with a hybrid format of two video-mediated locations contributing with a significant part of the learning which amounts to 110 ECTS credits. The remaining 10 ECTS credits of the program are run as physical symposiums, where all students take turns gathering at one of the two universities. This is a key factor in the development of the NoVA community aiming to ensure a good study environment when students gather across campuses in the hybrid format.

Research design

In the research project, the teachers and the researchers join into a collaboration and conduct the project drawing on the research principles from Design-Based Research (DBR) (e.g., Barab & Squire 2004, Amiel & Reeves 2008). DBR is a research approach designed by and for educators that seeks to increase the impact and translation of education research into improved practice (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012, p. 16). In this research project, we seek to explore potentials of establishing the hybrid format. We do that by practising design principles, facilitating creative problem solving, art-based methods, case-based projects, and collaborative group work throughout the program. These design principles constitute the basis for testing the hybrid configuration and through this we iterate and refine our understandings. This process continues throughout the research project and the pace of DBR is therefore in its core iterative. As a part of this iterative process the teachers play an active role

in all phases of the design experiments: preparing, carrying out and conducting a retrospective analysis (Cobb et al., 2003). The primary participating parties in the project are three researchers from Aalborg University and one researcher from Aalto university who is also responsible for the teaching at the NoVA master's program.

As a central part of DBR, it is crucial to examine the context of intervention (Anderson and Shattuck, 2012). To this end, rich descriptions of the unfolding of the program at Aalborg and Aalto university are being produced through a blend of methods. This includes participant observations, interviews, analysis of student produced materials as well as through a 'photo-safari' comprising pictures of student/teacher/technology interactions, classroom interior etc. At this stage of the study, we have primarily focused on participatory observations and photos of teaching which later will serve as a stepping stone for interviewing the students about their experiences with the different hybrid formats. As researchers, we use photo-documentation (see Rose, 2016) to capture and analyse e.g. technical set-up in the classrooms and teacher-students' interactions across campuses. The data produced is analysed as social practices of meaning-making activities drawing on social-cultural and socio-material theories (e.g., Wenger 2000, Fenwick et al 2011, Fenwick & Landri 2012).

A core challenge in carrying out the DBR approach arises given the joint role of the researchers as designer and researcher. In this project, the authors also have the role of teachers as well. Thus, we are not simply observing interactions but are actually "causing" the very same interactions we are making claims about (Barab and Squire, 2004). To respond to this challenge, we have varied and distributed roles differently, so every researcher has had both the role as teacher and observer. Likewise, patterns across our observations are categorised and discussed through several iterations. The students are informed about the project, and they are invited as co-researchers of the hybrid format. They are signing a letter of consent according to ethical guidelines.

Analytical themes

Drawing on the concept apparatus (Barad, 2007) derived from new materialist theorising, we form an analytical lens for identifying the hybrid learning format as an enactment of time and space beyond geographical and temporal constraints. This lens allows for an investigation of the complexity of 'the hybrid' and its performative effects in/on the learning situations, student and teacher bodies. This involves an attunement to the "material-discursive dynamics, modalities of groupings of agencies, of composition of power, which generate different histories, states of affairs and future possibilities" (Nicolic, 2018). In the project the concept contributes to understanding how the negotiation between art, technology and a PBL discourse and materialities is enacted as spaces of material-discursive dynamics in cross campus situations framed by the hybrid format.

The analytical themes so far:

Knowledge building practices – especially aesthetic practices – showing/telling across

One perspective is subject-related and focuses on how digital technology entangles with other materialities in the practices of meaning-making (Fenwick and Landri, 2012, Meyer et al. 2021). This can give an indication of how student collaboration is enacted in the hybrid format in processes of hands-on activities of physical artefacts such as analogue sketching, mock-ups, prototyping are shared and discussed between students/ students/teachers across campuses.

Community building practices – especially the cross-campus interactions

The other perspective is pedagogically related and focuses on how the learning environment is organised and structured by the hybrid setting regarding the participants' use of the digital and analogue equipment, engagement, and interaction on and across campuses. This can give an indication of to what extent the hybrid format facilitates a community beyond geographical distance.

Longitudinal: the evolution of how the format evolves from start to end of a program cycle (two years)

The third perspective concerns the spacing enacted in the hybrid fora in a longitudinal perspective. As the program consists of multiple, imbricated networks – local (what happens in the hybrid classroom, both socially and materially), interlocal (what happens between hybrid classrooms, both socially and materially), and trans local (what happens in situations where students are in connection with each other informally or in a dispersed fashion; that is, through their own devices and face-to-face interactions). This poses some interesting direction for the longitudinal aspects of the research project.

Preliminary findings and reflections

The preliminary findings of the study are based on analysis of observations during the first course, September 2023 addressing mainly how the hybrid format constitutes community building. The observations were conducted during the introductory days in relation to the local introduction and the interlocal introduction across the hybrid classroom. So far, the findings show how the spaces unfold as an enhanced diversity of orientations in the room. That goes for engaging in student roles and teacher roles, engaging in co-explorative processes with potentials and limitations in the technical set-up, and discourses of university teaching. Dynamics of diverse orientations constitute the reorganisation of the teaching/learning situations and provide a productive stir of teacher-student-learning discourses. Furthermore, the findings show pedagogical discussions on dynamically creating a shared space and community across different settings and locations. As the constituting of spacing emerges as plural rather than twofold, the notion “third space” becomes inadequate and more interesting to explore and understand in plural.

The project aims to further explore new conceptualizations of analysing the hybrid formats in plural as third spaces in particular in relation to emerging avenues:

- Iterations in the interdependencies in third spaces
- Student and teacher bodies in third spaces.

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