

Creating spaces of learning in academia: Fostering niches for professional learning practice

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In this presentation we present our investigation into the transformations to social relationships, labour, identity, and learning practices of academics resulting from a move by a faculty in an Australian university to a new building featuring open plan and flexible workspaces. We focus on how the practices of six academics, at a range of career stages, were pre-figured and negotiated within such built spaces. Academic work is complex and varied with characteristics of both professional autonomy and collaborative intellectual interactions shaping professional growth and productive work. To examine the shifts in social, labour, identity and learning practices, we employ the theory of practice architectures to our narrative research examining how the new built spaces both enabled and constrained the professional learning practices of the participants. We draw on a case study of the transition to the new building and explore the ways in which the move to the new building disrupted existing ecologies of practices around professional learning, and how the academics subsequently sought to establish new ‘niches’ to foster professional learning practices. The six participants made efforts to establish conditions for professional learning practices and a praxis of ‘becoming an academic’. They did so by working with, around, and against the pre-figuring arrangements of the new built environment. Our research contributes to knowledge about how workspaces can disrupt and reconfigure the professional learning practices of educators. It addresses a gap in the literature on academics’ professional learning in relation to changes in physical workspaces, making visible the ways in which academic practices are shaped by and shape new arrangements for professional learning in response to built environment.