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26

## CREATING LEARNING SPACES

Learning spaces are physical places and mental states that provide the best grounds for learning to take place in the most inspired and meaningful ways. Some of us need to be in our favourite corner at home or the library before we can focus and do our most productive learning. For others, it's not the place that counts but the state or frame of mind they're in, something they have to "get into" through sheer mental tuning despite life's infinite distractions. For yet others, their learning space is neither place nor frame but the company of others. The moral here is that no two persons are ever alike in their conception of learning spaces that work best for them. The question then arises as to how this should inform our understanding of learner differences. This issue examines the various dimensions of learning spaces and their implications on tutoring adult learners.

### REGULARS

- Editor's Note ... p.2
- Letters to the Editor ... p.3
- Tutor Reminder ... p.4
- From the Dean's Office ... p.6
- Tutor Profile ... p.13
- Motivation ... p.15

### FEATURES

- Learning to Learn ... p.5
- Learning and the City ... p.8
- Into the Remote Interior ... p.9
- Confessions of a Learning Space Builder ... p.10
- What are Learning Spaces? Tutors' Views ... p.11
- What are Learning Spaces? Learners' Views ... p.12



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## ABOUT TCX

TCX (Tutor Connexions) is an OUM e-newsletter that provides a dedicated link between the University and its tutors. It serves as a channel for news and updates on tutor-related events and as a platform for the sharing of views, experiences and tips on best practices in university teaching and learning.

TCX is published electronically twice every semester.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

First off, to all new and returning tutors, welcome back as we greet the new semester. It's that time of the year when we're all at our busiest; attending to a new load of work and groups of new learners that we've been assigned to guide.

The editorial board of TCX would also like to extend a very warm welcome to our new editor, Azahar Ahmad Nizar, who has taken over from Azeezah Jameelah. The latter, having done an excellent job for the past issues, has been called away to attend to new tasks. To Azeezah, too, we'd like to say many thanks!

The present issue, TCX 26, engages with "learning spaces", a term which might seem alien but is actually something all of us are intimately familiar with. No one knows our learning spaces better than ourselves, although we might sometimes take them for granted, or even forget that we need to create and recreate them. If we think about it, we'd realize that learning spaces are extremely important for learners as well as tutors. Without them, we'd function less efficiently.

We hope the features in this issue will serve as food for thought for the new semester. Please drop us a line to share your stories about your own unique learning spaces. Do write to us too if you'd like to contribute to the next issue (TCX 27: Thinking About Thinking). The theme for TCX 27 is previewed on page 4.

On behalf of the editorial board and OUM, we wish you a productive time ahead.

Dr David CL Lim

Chief Editor





### NEED FOR MORE RESOURCES FOR TUTORS

At OUM, I taught algebra between 2004 and 2007 and basic mechanics and linear programming in 2008. As a tutor, I feel that there is a need for more resources for OUM tutors.

Tutors need to constantly acquire additional knowledge. During tutorials, my learners hardly ask any questions. It seems as if they never read the modules at all! However, their common problem is that they do not understand some topics, concepts and so on. So, it is the role of the tutors to effectively explain to them the concepts. To do this, the tutors must be well-equipped with the required knowledge.

In 2008, I was given very short notice to teach basic mechanics and linear programming. As a result, there was not enough time for me to purchase reference books. Hence, I took the initiative to get materials from websites. Here, I would like to compliment OUM for introducing the Mathematics Resource Centre (TCX Issue 24) which I find quite useful and helpful with its links to many websites for my source of references.

Still, OUM should review its current tutor resources for the sake of the learners.

*Farm Choon Moy  
Negeri Sembilan Learning Centre*

Have you tried searching for references in our library collection? We may have the books that you require.

For your information, the Library purchases reading materials based on the course/programme reference list. If the books are not listed as textbooks or main references, we may not get them. If you would like to request for a book which you think may benefit our learners, you may suggest

it to the Faculty. The Faculty may then include the book as part of the main references/textbooks to be used by all students taking the subject and by other tutors teaching it.

*Puan Ruzita binti Ramly  
Chief Librarian, Tan Sri Dr Abdullah Sanusi Digital Library*

### ALLOCATE SLOTS FOR RELATED SUBJECTS

My main issue about OUM is the inconsistent allocation of slots.

During certain semesters, I have been asked to teach subjects that are not based on what I have taught before. This creates unnecessary problems in that I have to make new slides, read different books and so on. I also find it challenging because I lack the required experience to teach these new subjects. At the end of the day, learners will suffer because they cannot gain much from the tutorials.

I sincerely hope that OUM will look into this and ensure that they choose tutors who are well-versed in the subjects to be taught.

*Dr Arumugam a/l Raman  
Kedah Learning Centre*

Dear Dr Arumugam,

Yes, I agree with you that allocation of slots should be based on the tutor's expertise. Only then can our tutors provide quality learning support to our learners. Mastery of subject content is essential among tutors in ensuring that the learners are provided with timely guidance and response. As much as possible, our tutors are allocated subjects based on their expertise.

At times, however, we are unable to recruit tutors with certain expertise. This is generally due to shortage of tutors in particular fields of study, especially in geographically isolated areas. Therefore, we have no choice but to allocate slots to tutors whom we know can deliver their best to our learners.

*Assoc Prof Dr Santhi Raghavan  
Director, Centre for Tutor Management & Development*

**We welcome letters from our readers on any issue that may be of concern to you. You may use a pseudonym if you wish but please mention which learning centre you are from. Please e-mail us at [tcx@oum.edu.my](mailto:tcx@oum.edu.my).**



# IMPORTANT DATES

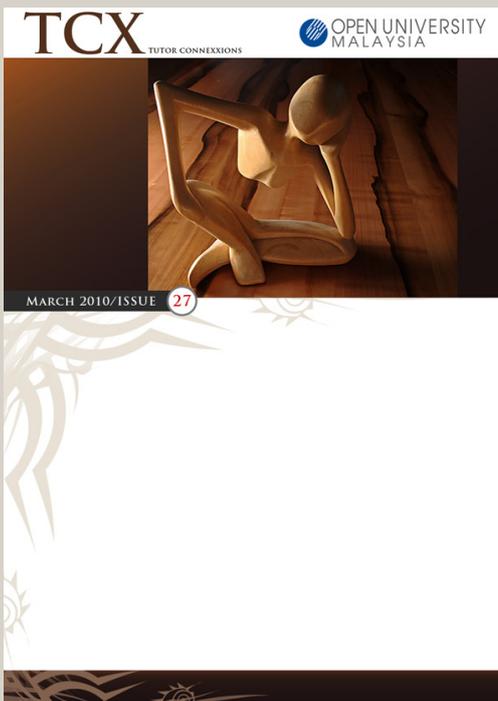
## OMES Deadlines

| PROGRAMME     | ACTIVITY                                  | DATE (2010)     |
|---------------|---|-----------------|
| Undergraduate | Key in marks for assignments and quizzes* | 8 – 21 Mar      |
|               | Key in marks for online participation*    | 22 – 28 Mar     |
|               | <i>*Except for MCQ-format subjects</i>    |                 |
| Postgraduate  | Key in marks for Assignment 1             | 22 Feb – 7 Mar  |
|               | Key in marks for Assignment 2             | 22 Mar – 28 Mar |
|               | Key in marks for online participation     | 5 – 11 Apr      |

## Upcoming Activities

| ACTIVITY   | DATE (2010)            | REMARKS  |
|--|------------------------|--|
| Monitoring of New/Senior Tutors and Facilitators | Tutorials/Seminars 1-5 | Observation during tutorials/seminars will be conducted by Lead Tutors and OUM academic staff. |

## COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE ...



### TCX 27: THINKING ABOUT THINKING

#### Where is the “Box” We’re Supposed to “Think” Outside of?

We are often told that being able to “think” is good and that “thinking outside the box” is even better. Just as often, we accept the foregoing maxim as true without even needing to pause and think. But suppose we do. Suppose we take time to think about what it actually means to “think”, and to unravel the relationship between “thinking”, “knowledge” and “truth”? How might all this inform our practice as tutors? TCX 27 interrogates these issues in relation to ODL education.

**Want to contribute? Email us at [tcx@oum.edu.my](mailto:tcx@oum.edu.my)**

# LEARNING TO LEARN

By Dr Safiah Md Yusof (safiah\_md Yusof@oum.edu.my)

As tutors, our primary responsibility is the sharing of learning with our learners. Beyond the four walls of the tutorial room, though, we are also expected to assist our learners to make full use of their learning opportunities. It's not just about teaching them what they need to learn, it's also about teaching them how to learn. There are three ways in which tutors can assist learners to maximize learning.

Firstly, let's begin with the premise that people are unique individuals and thus have different ways of dealing with their life experiences. It makes sense then to celebrate difference as a virtue in learning instead of viewing it as a learning impediment. Some learners prefer an open, interactive learning space where they are given room to voice their opinions and challenge received ideas. Yet others would be intimidated by such a volatile atmosphere, requiring more private spaces to process their ideas quietly. Given the myriad differences in learning styles, tutors would do well to vary their teaching approaches to accommodate learner diversity. By being flexible teachers, we help the learners to develop at their own pace in their own space.

Secondly, tutors also serve as role models for learners. We were once learners ourselves before we became tutors, and the truth is, we still are learners because learning is a life-long journey. In OUM, learning is sharing: everybody participates in a learning community which synergistically produces and refines knowledge by bouncing ideas off each other.

For example, one tutor found it useful to keep mind-maps and study notes in his pockets. In the bus, while waiting for a friend, whatever free time comes his way, he will flip through his learning materials and slowly but surely accumulate knowledge. He practically creates a personal learning space for himself regardless of where he is because the desire for learning transcends any spatial or temporal bounds. He makes it a point to share this tip with his learners: always make use of pockets of time. Steal a little bit of time before time steals away from you!

*It's not just about teaching them what they need to learn, it's also about teaching them how to learn.*



Thirdly, we can also introduce learners to various learning spaces that are available to them. More often than not, learners require some encouragement and coaxing to set them on the right path. This is especially true of our open and distance learning (ODL) environment where learners are exposed to advanced modes of sharing knowledge. With the advent of new technologies in education, learners no longer have to be physically present in a classroom to gain knowledge. They could be reclining on a couch at home, cradling their laptops, clacking away at the keys, communicating with tutors and fellow learners who are separated miles away.

For example, myLMS provides learners with discussion forums for each course. Learners have the opportunity to learn from their peers and tutors through exchange of ideas and notes, Q&As and collaborative work. All these new forms of learning allow for more efficient and effective sharing of knowledge in an age where information is constantly changing at an unprecedented rapid speed. Thus, ODL is the learning space of the future, best adapted to this modern mode of living.

In conclusion, tutors as facilitators are called upon to help their learners maximize learning by making learning spaces for them to grow. A push in the right direction makes a world of difference. Once put on the right track, our learners can slowly but surely learn to fashion their own unique learning spaces and gradually become independent and resourceful individuals. 

# INTERVIEW WITH PROF DR SHAARI ABD HAMID

By Dr David CL Lim (david@oum.edu.my)



*PROF DR SHAARI ABD HAMID has been the Dean of the Faculty of Business and Management (FBM) since October 2001. He was in charge of the Centre for Graduate Studies (CGS) from June 2006 to August 2007. He was also the Director of the Centre for Assessment of Prior Learning (CAPL) from September 2007 to December 2007.*

*Dr David:* What is the most satisfying achievement you have had as Dean of the FBM?

*Prof Shaari:* At OUM, everyday is a satisfying day. We are reminded to be cognizant of what we are doing each day. In one way or another, we are making history in many respects as we chart our journey in this ever expanding ODL world. As OUM makes its mark in the market, I am very pleased to note that FBM has been a formidable enabler in that process. I believe that it's going to remain that way as we try to strengthen our hold in the market at large.

*Dr David:* Can you share with us your idea of "learning"? What is "learning" to you personally?

*Prof Shaari:* To me, learning is acquiring something new with respect to knowledge, skills, attitude, behaviour, etc.

Personally, I feel that in this ever competitive world of ours, continuous learning is a must to enable one to remain relevant, either as a member of an organization or as an individual.

I am very conscious of the fact that I have to continuously learn about various things to enable me to perform sufficiently well in the multiple roles that are expected of me as a dean, an administrator, an academician, a member of the organization, an individual, and so on.

To illustrate, the current addendum to my portfolio as the Director of the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment (CTLA) requires me to possess new knowledge with regards to course assessment at university level. I have been able to respond to those requirements through independent learning, assessing information through the facilities that have been made available to all of us in our respective learning spaces.

In a number of cases, I have been confronted with situations where I am expected to contribute ideas involving aesthetic elements in a number of OUM events. This is something which is at variance with the kind of training that I have gone through in my academic pursuits. It requires me to develop skills that are unrelated to the academic training that I have had in the past. Again, the fulfillment of this expectation would not have been possible without the appropriate learning spaces.

*Dr David:* Different people have different ideas about what kind of learning spaces suit them best. What is your ideal learning space, and how challenging is it for you to construct one each time you need it?

*Prof Shaari:* "Where there is a will there is a way." So far, with respect to the expectations on me as the Dean of FBM and the Director of CTLA, I am quite comfortable with the virtual learning space that is readily available to all of us as academicians. It has enabled me to learn about assessment practices in other higher education institutions (HEIs), both local and abroad, without much hassle.

*(Continued on next page)*



*I am very conscious of the fact that I have to continuously learn about various things to enable me to perform sufficiently well in the multiple roles that are expected of me as a dean, an administrator, an academician, a member of the organization, an individual, and so on.*

With respect to the aesthetic aspect, the knowledge acquired “virtually” sometimes has to be complemented by viewing real exhibits. I believe one has to be willing to bear some costs in order to reap the benefits.

*Dr David:* Do you think that our society pays sufficient attention to the importance of individual learning spaces? In other words, does society sometimes expect individuals to perform at their peak irrespective of whether the required learning spaces are available?

*Prof Shaari:* I believe that I have answered this question in part above. I would just like to add that there is no free ride in this world of ours. One has to bear the costs to reap the benefits. However, costs and benefits are dubious concepts, sometimes involving indirect and non-obvious out-of-pocket costs which are difficult to quantify in order to influence society to share the costs for sharing the benefits.

*Dr David:* What role do you think OUM tutors can play in helping their learners to think about and construct their own learning spaces so that they may learn at the optimum level?

*Prof Shaari:* One of the richest learning resources available at OUM is the students themselves. Each one of them possesses a wealth of experience which in many cases has not been beneficially tapped. In the context of learning spaces, I believe that tutors can play a lead role in promoting learning among students and between students and the tutor. This is done by creating a physical and psychological environment which promotes in-class learning among them. I believe that if this is done concertedly, it could be developed into a culture which may well extend beyond the bounds of the tutorial classes.

*Dr David:* Aside from helping learners to construct their own learning spaces, which other areas would you personally like to see our tutors play a bigger role in helping learners?

*Prof Shaari:* Tutors play a crucial role in helping learners construct their own learning spaces. They must be seen to be doing so by learners. We often experience situations in which an oversubscribed class gradually dwindles in numbers as the semester progresses. Our ability to maintain our students’ interest throughout the course of a semester has a lot to do with how we help them create conducive learning spaces.

*Dr David:* Any last words for our tutors?

*Prof Shaari:* It is important for us as tutors to receive feedback on our performance from students to enable us to maintain our relevance as an important element of our students’ learning experience. Good luck to our tutors and I hope that we can contribute more productively to students’ learning this year than we did last year! 

# LEARNING AND THE CITY

By Dr Nurul Muiz Murad (nurul\_muiz@oum.edu.my)

Geographically speaking, it is possible to conceive of learning spaces in terms of an opposition between the city and the non-city. The city conjures images of neon lights, smog and smoke, fast cars and even faster lifestyles. The non-city, by way of contrast, is everything that the city is not. It includes the *kampung* (which lies at the opposite end of the spectrum vis-à-vis the city) and everything else between it and the city (suburbia, city outskirts, and so on).

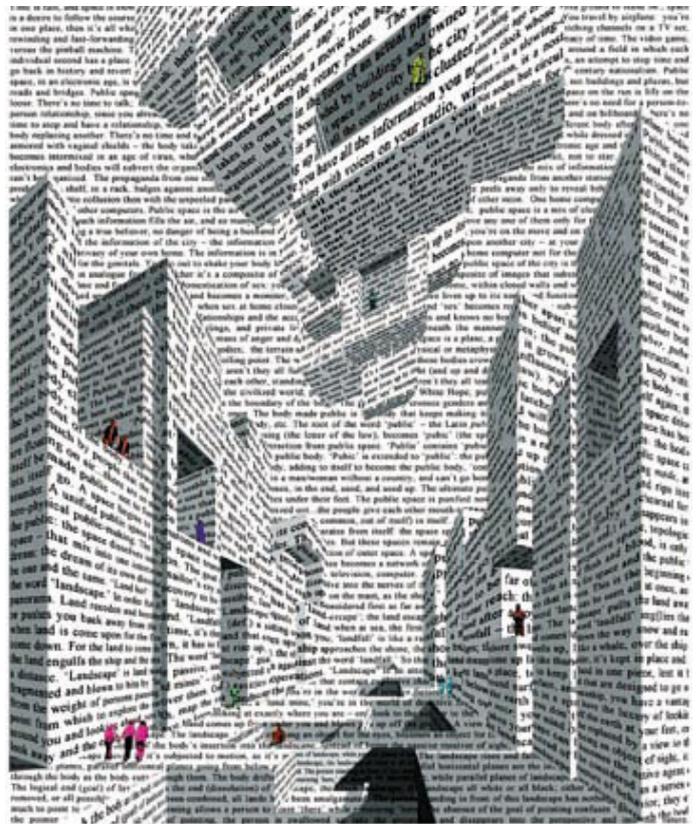
In terms of learning spaces, the city promises a wide variety of facilities (as well as distractions) not readily available in the non-city. For example, the best physical libraries are found in the city centre and so are the best entertainment hotspots. Theoretically, it is easier to fashion sophisticated learning spaces in the city because of the multiplicity of choices available to the city dweller. The tendency is to create a flexible learning space which combines the best of both worlds: education for dinner and entertainment for dessert.

Conversely, the non-city is typically imagined as an idyllic space that promises serenity and sanity away from the hustle and bustle of city life. You can read a book by the brook as you wander over open spaces, lost in wonder over nature's bountiful beauty.

This binary opposition that I have drawn is of course simplistic. We know that even within the city, there are surely differences in the way learning spaces are conceived by individual learners. One city dweller might prefer online discussions in cyberspace in the privacy of his room; yet another might be more energized by a group discussion at the National Library.

Even between the city and the non-city, you may yet find points of intersection. Imagine two individuals, one from the city and the other from the non-city. Both individuals are introverts who prefer the solitude of their own rooms over the noise and din of public life. In terms of learning styles, both prefer to lock themselves up in their rooms and read quietly as the outside world turns on its axis. In this case, aren't they both occupying the same learning space regardless of geographical location? This is because learning spaces are not confined merely to physical spaces or opportunities; learning spaces also exist in the mind.

As learners, regardless of where we may find ourselves, the creation of a conducive learning space is key to academic



success. As such, it is good to adhere to certain universal principles to anchor us on the right path towards scholastic achievement. The following factors may serve as a guide on creating learning spaces for learners: (1) a sense of mission, (2) self-discipline, (3) positive interactions, and (4) healthy lifestyle. You will find that no matter where you are, these principles universally apply. Our mission as a learner is to learn. This obviously requires self-discipline to see you through the challenges. While you're at it, you need to interact positively with fellow learners and tutors in order to share knowledge effectively. To sustain yourself through it all, you need to maintain a healthy lifestyle by exercising regularly, eating a balanced diet, getting enough rest and relaxation.

In the final analysis, differences between city and non-city (while very real) do not ultimately make all the difference. What counts rather is the willingness of the learners to maximise their learning by optimising whatever resources they have at their disposal. The city and non-city exist out there as physical learning spaces; the individual learner carries within him his own mental learning space. It's all in the mind. **TCX**

# INTO THE REMOTE INTERIOR

By Jimmy Teo Hui Thian (jteo@oum.edu.my)

During my recent work visit to Sabah, I had the pleasure of meeting groups of teachers who have been posted to the remote interior to teach in government schools.

Four questions were posed to 180 teachers. The questions were simple and straightforward as the whole exercise was simply to find out their views on learning spaces.

The questions and paraphrased responses are as follows:

1. What is “learning space” to you?

To many, “learning space” is, well, a place to learn. Some went on to add that it must be a place that is quiet, conducive, comfortable, free from disturbance, a place that suits the individual, where learning could take place, and where there is mental preparedness. Very few teachers thought of “learning space” as a formal classroom, library or tutorial room.

*“Learning space is not a physical place or space but where there is mental preparedness to learn.” (Respondent A)*

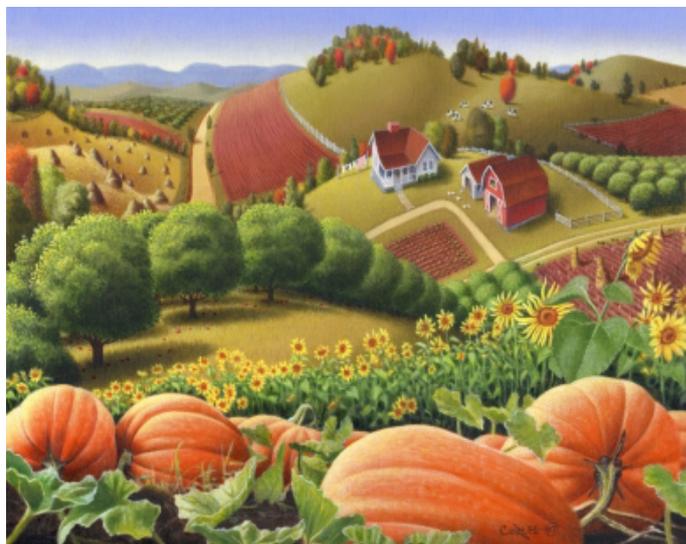
2. Do you have your own learning space?

Almost all the respondents said that they had their own learning spaces. Only a few referred to actual physical spaces like their houses or their rooms. Most imagined learning space as a meta-space or conceptual space which they have created. Some said they had limited opportunities to create their own learning spaces due to work and family commitments.

*“Yes, I have my learning space but it depends very much on my surroundings. I make it comfortable by adapting to my surroundings.” (Respondent B)*

3. Does your remote location make a difference to how you construct your learning spaces?

Most of the respondents answered “Yes” to this question. They were quick to add that in the remote interior, learning space was what you make it out to be. The individuals would have to adapt and create a



comfortable space for themselves as they did not have the luxury of nice libraries, resource centres or even proper rooms.

*“Yes. Here, it would depend on the situation. I have to adapt and make it comfortable for me.” (Respondent C)*

4. Is the quietness of the locality a blessing or otherwise?

Almost all of them agreed that it was a blessing as there was less or no distraction at all. This is in contrast to how it usually is in the cities. But some lamented that being in the interior also meant there would be limited or no access at all to further learning resources.

*“It can be both. It can be a blessing because there is no distraction and you can fully concentrate on your learning. However, it can also be a liability since it can be limiting in terms of electricity, time and other learning resources.” (Respondent D)*

\*TCX would like to thank all respondents for taking part in the survey. 

# CONFESSIONS OF A LEARNING SPACE BUILDER

By Dr David CL Lim (david@oum.edu.my)

Like everyone else, I am a learning space builder. I read, and thus create my learning spaces, almost everywhere: in bed, at the office, in the toilet, while pacing non-stop in the shape of a square in my living room, while waiting impatiently to board a plane, while having meals or surfing the Net.

Being able to read anywhere and anytime is no extraordinary feat, especially if you have no aversion to reading. But what about the times when you need to be productive, that is, to actually produce work?

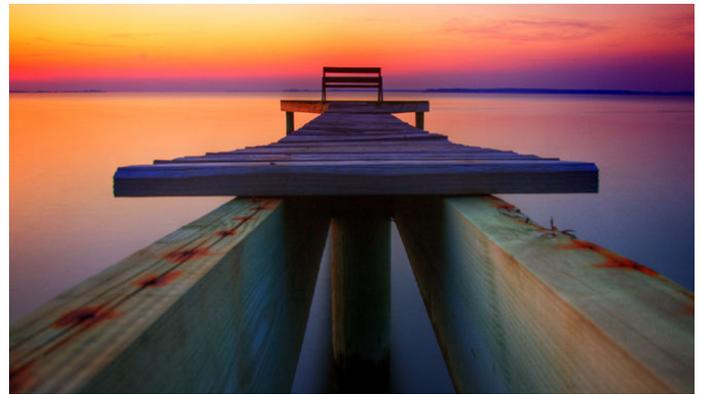
By producing work, I don't mean just reading, which is really only receptive work, but having to write out something substantial that you want or need to: a proposal, a report, a journal paper, an assignment, an extended love letter, lesson plans for tutorials, and the like.

I suspect that few, if anyone, can actually produce work that is worth anything (convince audiences, get an A grade, get accepted for journal publication) while in the multi-tasking frame of mind.

Stir frying vegetables and writing an essay on the globality of the English language don't seem to go very well together for me. Similar odd pairings apply, including waving at friends passing by and trying to write a serious report at the same time, and answering endless incoming phone-calls when you're trying to write a critique on, say, the relationship between literature and politics, an essay due yesterday.

The point I am making, simply, is that there is great value in being single-minded, as in surrounding oneself in a bubble of silence, at least for those of us who have not been conditioned to be productive only when there are endless distractions and constant noise around them.

Being able to focus singularly on the task at hand and in silence is indeed precious luxury, as many of us know only too well. There seems to be a shortage of it, which does not in any way detract from its value. After all, it is not for nothing that libraries and exam halls in session around the world have a no-noise policy. It is no coincidence either that hospitals are quiet, or that monks retreat into the serenity of silence afforded by remote places such as uninhabited forests in order to meditate.



There is a therapeutic benefit to being able to hear oneself think in the luxury of silence for an extended period of time. If we recognize this as true, then perhaps we should also consider how we, as tutors, might be able to communicate the same to our learners in order to help them create their own productive learning spaces.

Counselling theory supports the popularly overlooked fact that we are often oblivious to the reality before us. We don't always see what is in front of us. The same applies to some of our learners who might not recognize that productive learning spaces are not found but created through sheer effort, and that strategies are required to ensure that these necessary learning spaces are created for their benefit.

How might tutors aid in learners' construction of productive learning spaces?

Clearly there are many potential solutions to the issue, just as there is clearly no one solution that is applicable to all individuals. Still, I have found one guiding principle to be useful when engaging with learners – that principle being recognition of the challenge some face in creating that much-needed yet elusive productive learning space.

The principle is, in essence, a principle of reciprocity. Recognize that their challenge is more than valid, and that it is the same challenge facing many of us flawed humans, just as we want to be recognized for our concerns and need to be effective in what we set out to achieve.

That, to me, is the basis for everything else in the forging of an equitable tutor-learner relationship. **TCX**

# WHAT ARE LEARNING SPACES? TUTORS' VIEWS

Compiled by Aezi Hani Abd Rashid (aezihani@gmail.com)

**T**he creation of conducive learning spaces for learners is part and parcel of a tutor's life. Tutors are responsible for facilitating the sharing of knowledge with learners in a positive learning environment. Let's take a look at what our tutors have to say about learning spaces.

You will find that not everybody responds favourably to the same learning space. Usually, people think of the library as the ideal space to study. Apparently, the peace and quiet is conducive to studying. However, some may find it discomfoting because of the presence of other library goers. These people prefer a different type of quiet: the solitude and privacy of their room and work desk.

And sometimes, peace and quiet can in fact prevent some people from learning. They need noise and the constant buzz of people to keep them energised. Otherwise, they tend to drift and doze off from sheer boredom. So you see, learning spaces are not objective realities out there in the real world but subjective constructs created by individual learners to suit their specific learning needs.

*Assoc Prof Dr Fahrul Huyop  
Johor Learning Centre*

Parents of little children create learning spaces by means of cute little tables with chairs. This is to help children understand that learning is done at a specific place and time. As children grow and mature, their learning spaces tend to become more complicated and sophisticated.

For adult learners, the situation is somewhat different. Mental space is crucial as well. To ensure peace of mind, their families must be supportive and understanding by giving space to the learners to study without disturbance and distraction. Adult learners need to find out what works personally for them. One man's meat is another man's poison.

The ideal learning space could be anywhere: on the bed, on the mat, on the floor, in a quiet library, the serenity of reading under the shade of a tree, feeling the warm breeze stroking your face gently. When I was a student, I created my learning space by the lake, as there was ample light and shade, and most of all PEACE!

*Anna Mary Perumal  
Sibu Learning Centre*

I see learning space as a period of reflection about what we have learned previously. We use this space to summarize the knowledge that we have gained so far and to assess our learning progress. There are many things that we can do to reinforce our understanding: activities to check our recall of salient points, group discussion to generate more ideas and refine them, etc. This way, our knowledge and learning will always be refreshed.

*Zulhairi Zakariah  
Melaka Learning Centre*

## WRITE FOR TCX AND WIN RM50!



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Send us your completed articles. Or, if you prefer, chat with the Editors about story ideas you're thinking of developing. E-mail us at [tcx@oum.edu.my](mailto:tcx@oum.edu.my).

If your article is published, you'll receive a token sum of RM50. (Internal and full-time staff are not eligible).

# WHAT ARE LEARNING SPACES? LEARNERS' VIEWS

Compiled by Shafiza Ahmad Suffian (shafiza\_ahmad@oum.edu.my)

**A**s learners, we need to create learning spaces that facilitate our learning experience. Obviously, there are many kinds of learners, hence many types of learning spaces. Let's take a look at what our learners have to say about learning spaces.

OUM provides a variety of learning spaces for adult learners. I prefer face-to-face tutorials because I can directly communicate with my tutors and friends. If I don't understand something, I can get feedback from them immediately to keep me on the right track.

E-learning is also an alternative form of learning space which OUM provides. I like to study online as I have access to multiple sources of knowledge. It is also helpful to students because if they miss a tutorial session, they can simply go to myLMS and join the online forum. This way, they can still catch up and keep up with their learning.

*Diana Md Disi  
Serdang Raya Learning Centre*

We all have our favourite site or location where we can concentrate on learning. During my undergraduate days, I was always amazed by the fact that some of my colleagues could study with the music on at full blast! I had to go to the hostel study room in order to concentrate. Now at the age of 58, I still need a quiet room to myself to study. I think learning is a very individual thing and unless we need to discuss something, studying alone is best.

*Paul Lim  
Kuala Lumpur Learning Centre*

I feel comfortable in my own home because I can do anything I like while learning. I am a person who won't stay put in one place. I become very restless so my home is the best place for me especially when I am preparing for exams. It's better at home because I can listen to music and sing along as I please, I can take breaks whenever I want, I can stop to vacuum the house, wash and hang the laundry, take time off to cook, go out shopping when I feel like it.

This is what I call "freedom of the mind", meaning the liberty to conduct my learning in an enjoyable and flexible manner. I am not tied to any restricted hours or stuffy regulations, for example, having to keep my voice down in the library which blocks my state of mind. The library is more of a resource center for me and a meeting place for group discussions.

The office? Out of the question!

*Hatifah Hussin  
Kuala Lumpur Learning Centre*

Let me share my point of view as a working mom. Frankly, it's not easy! 1,001 challenges to deal with. These unpredictable situations may hamper and demotivate you at times. My ideal space: no specific place but I like having my own study corner at home and occasionally at the library. That is if I can even find the time!

Anyway, I love to have notes, small ones to carry around with me. When I need to remember a lot of facts, I will prepare mind maps and interesting visuals in A3 or poster size and pin them to the wall. Each poster will have a topic summary. Now imagine having 10 to 17 topics on the wall. You need a lot of wallpaper, highlighters and coloured markers to pull this off. The more colourful my notes are, the longer I remember.

This also helps when you review past-year questions. You can see all the main points right in front of you instead of wasting time flipping through the module to look for a particular idea. To be able to look or even have a glance at my posters once a day brings a huge impact to my memory. Let's just say that this is more of a self-motivation thingy! It seems that this method works very well for me at the moment. Well, the older you get, the less space you have in your memory!

*Mimi Renati binti Zainol  
Bangi Learning Centre*

# OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Interview with Ayub Nasir and Johnathan Wong Shin Voon

By Azahar Ahmad Nizar (azahar\_ahmad@oum.edu.my)

AYUB NASIR and JOHNATHAN WONG SHIN VOON are both lead tutors at OUM's learning centre in Seksyen 7, Shah Alam. Johnathan is the recipient of the Best Lead Tutor Award At National Level for 2009.

*Azahar:* Please tell us a little bit about your educational background.

**Ayub:** My initial background is in banking. I took up my Masters in Business Administration in 1999. After that, I left banking and joined the Faculty of Business in Universiti Tenaga Nasional on a free-lance basis. I was also then tutoring at Open University Malaysia (OUM) concurrently and have been doing so until now.

**Johnathan:** I was a teacher in the past, and like Encik Ayob, also joined the banking line. Along the way, I realised that teaching is still my passion and so I decided to return to teaching.

*Azahar:* Learning spaces are an important component of effective learning. Give us your take on learning spaces.

**Ayub:** Let me begin by saying that the concept of learning spaces is not familiar to me by way of theoretical research. I could, however, give a layman's view of what I personally understand to be learning spaces.

I think of learning spaces as opportunities—opportunities for the student to maximise their learning. Learning is for life, and so if the student desires to learn, he/she has to give him/herself the opportunity to learn along the way. These opportunities may come from the university, tutors, family, and so on.

*Tutoring is in fact a two-way process. Both tutor and learner are sharing knowledge: I don't just expect them to learn from me, I also expect to learn from them.*

The university, for example, may provide opportunities for the student to acquire knowledge in the most conducive manner possible. This can be achieved by making sure that the physical environment is perfectly tailored to the students' requirements. The architecture and design of buildings may have an effect on the students' receptivity to learning.

**Johnathan:** I agree with Encik Ayub — the concept carries various meanings and may refer to any number of things. For me, what comes to mind when I think of learning spaces is cyberspace. Since OUM practices blended learning and online learning, this virtual space becomes even more important to OUM students, especially as they depend a lot on myLMS for their learning materials and to participate in online forums.

*Azahar:* You were once learners yourselves. How did you create the ideal learning space for yourself back then?

**Ayub:** That was a long, long time ago. Anyway, it is important for me to have my own private physical space to study, my own little corner, as it were. I am a very habitual person — I need that sense of familiarity and quiet to study. It works for me, but I am not about to say that it would similarly work for others. Some may study perfectly fine while listening to music or in the middle of a noisy crowd. Whatever works, I guess.

**Johnathan:** As for me, I feel that you need to create that learning space for yourself, wherever and whenever. As a matter of practice, I used to steal pockets of time during train rides to revise my pocket notes or to skim through mind maps. As the Malay proverb goes: "*Sikit-sikit lama-lama jadi bukit.*" These pockets of time ultimately add up to hours and hours of substantial learning.

*Azahar:* Now you're tutors working for OUM. What does it feel like to be tutors?

**Ayub:** I've been a tutor since 2002 and so far it's been an enjoyable and challenging experience. I would like to stress that tutoring is not merely the linear transmission of knowledge from tutor to learner. Tutoring is in fact a two-way process. Both tutor and learner are sharing knowledge:

*(Continued on next page)*

I don't just expect them to learn from me, I also expect to learn from them.

Coming back to the idea of learning spaces as opportunities, I feel that as tutors, we have to provide our learners with opportunities to explore ideas and to ask questions. This way, they will develop the courage to speak up and come up with original solutions to problems.

**Johnathan:** I am honoured to be a part of OUM's teaching staff and to render service to the university. It's always a pleasure to meet learners from all walks of life and age groups. In fact, as an online tutor, I also have the experience of interacting with learners who reside in other parts of the world. Online learning makes possible the communication of ideas across continents. As tutors, we all have to embrace technology as a means of disseminating knowledge.

*Azahar:* How do you find OUM students generally?

**Ayub:** Actually, I can easily identify with our students because I used to be a part-time student myself. And I know that it is not easy to juggle work and studies. Our students have to divide time between family and their other commitments. Therefore, it helps if family members give them all the support they can get. That is also an opportunity for them to learn. As it is, they have very little free time for themselves, let alone for their family, given that their weekends are usually reserved for classes, assignments and studying for exams. The family has to sacrifice so that the learner has breathing space to study.

**Johnathan:** I would like to add that because of their various commitments and responsibilities, you will often find OUM students complaining about the lack of time for revision. By the time they get home, they are already burnt out and family matters demand their attention. So you often find that OUM students fail to allocate enough time to properly maximise their learning.

*Azahar:* In light of your observations, do you have any tips or advice for our adult learners out there?

**Johnathan:** Since our discussion is on the subject of learning spaces, I would like to affirm firstly that the creation of these spaces is indeed useful and helpful for our adult learners. However, what is more important is the willingness and determination of the learner to acquire knowledge. You can provide them with the most complete and state-of-the-art learning space, but none of this would matter if the learner is not resilient in the face of challenges and obstacles.

**Ayub:** I fully agree with Johnathan on this point. Ultimately, the learner has to generate the will and desire to learn regardless of the circumstances that he finds himself in. We all have our own set of problems, but if we are positive, we should focus on overcoming those problems instead of dwelling on them. Nobody else is going to do that learning for the learner but himself.

Having said that, I would also like to remind adult learners who are working that their first priority should always be their work. Why do I say this? Because you are being paid to work, whereas you are paying to learn. Learning is a means of maintaining and enhancing your career, but without that career to begin with, you would not have the funds to study anyway.

*Azahar:* It's 2010 and we are 10 years away from 2020. How do you see OUM's role in developing a new generation of graduates come 2020?

**Ayub:** I would like to believe that as an institution of higher learning, OUM is doing its part to generate graduates who are competitive in the job market. In fact, the workplace can also be seen as a learning space where the learner finally gets to apply what he has learned to solve real-life problems. This is in line with OUM's philosophy of inculcating a culture of life-long learning.

**Johnathan:** To me, OUM's biggest selling point is its focus on online learning. I believe that our graduates are more IT-savvy because of their exposure to our blended mode of learning. This will hold them in good stead as our country is heading towards the future and needs quality graduates who are technologically savvy and globally competitive. 

## ONLINE POLL

As a tutor, I believe that I can help learners to create learning spaces by:

1. encouraging them to think independently by giving them short essay tests.
2. encouraging them to work as a group.
3. adding variety to the assignments and encouraging them to think from a different perspective.
4. ensuring that the tutorial room is always conducive for the learners.

Please cast your votes online!



# TEACHING IN THE MUD GARDEN

Adapted by Azeezah Jameelah Mohamed Mohideen (azeezah@oum.edu.my)

Having just left a weekly meeting during which absolutely nothing was accomplished, I was feeling woefully uninspired as I fought my way back to my classroom. I felt like a fish swimming upstream through the throngs of students loitering in the halls.

My classroom was mysteriously and mercifully devoid of students, leaving me a few moments to think before the day began. Then, I saw it: *I shall teach / in a mud garden / under rhythm*. Someone had written this short poem on the whiteboard in my classroom.

I read it a few times to be sure that my eyes were not deceiving me. Two thoughts raced through my mind at once.

**Thought 1:** One of my apathetic, disaffected students had actually written something – something intriguing and somewhat clever to boot!

**Thought 2:** What does this mean?

I was delighted to have the first period free to uncover the meaning of this piece of anonymous poetry. I pondered over each and every detail and nuance.

*I shall teach ...* Well, yes, I shall. No mystery there.

*Under rhythm ...* Well, this student was on to something. Teaching does have its own rhythm and each teacher has his or her own.

*In a mud garden ...* Is this how this student imagined school to be? We were not a rural school and had neither mud nor a garden. I was stumped. Mud garden ... mud garden ... mud garden.

And then I realised it. School is exactly that: a mud garden! A garden has tremendous potential but takes a great deal of cultivation characterised by patience, nurturing, care and gentleness. Given all these “nutrients”, the garden will grow and flourish into something lovely and prosperous from an itty bitsy seed. Neglecting one’s garden can turn it to mud and make the garden lie fallow. Like a garden, schoolchildren require care, love and nurturing so that they do not turn to mud.



*I shall teach / in a mud garden / under rhythm.*

The door to my classroom swung open and my students began to pour in. They took their seats and got settled, borrowing pens from one another and searching for their assignments.

“Good morning!” I began. “Who can tell me what a metaphor is?” 

**Adapted from:** Garran, D. (2005). Teaching in the mud garden. *MotivateUs.com*. Retrieved January 18, 2010, from <http://www.motivateus.com/stories/mudgarden.htm>



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