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Translated Version:

Third Space - the term was coined by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg in the early 2010s. Actually, the Third Space initially has nothing to do with learning. It is a space that is not home and not a space of work or school. One feels comfortable here, likes to drop by, can stay and leave again, meet people or stay by themselves. There is food and beverages. Conversations can be held. In this blog post, Joachim Sucker describes his personal experiences with the Third Space in connection with adult education. The former marketing manager of the VHS Hamburg now accompanies the development of innovative educational offers.

The written final examination of my commercial training took place in 1973 in an unadorned multifunctional room in the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce. I sat directly in front of a sink whose faucet unfortunately poured a drop into the bowl tirelessly every ten seconds. It drove me crazy.

It was probably the first time I had ever been upset by an educational setting. It's not just the teachers and their learning didactics that are part of it, space is also a critical factor in learning. There is no such thing as THE learning space, there are endless ways to design learning spaces.

We all know school, many also know university lecture halls or the lifeless gray EDP rooms of vocational education. Educational institutions are visited in order to obtain a degree, to learn predefined topics in a class environment. Learning follows a clear agenda here, and this is what these rooms are designed for. These are neutral spaces that should imply nothing negative as far as possible. They are an expression of the lowest common denominator - whatever that may be in the minds of those responsible. With the increasing possibilities of digitally supported learning on the web, almost all spaces are suitable for learning, depending on personal preferences.

Freedom for curiosity

Unintended learning, or what I call accidental learning, relies on unlimited learning content on the Web. YouTube lists a hit rate of over 175 million for the term "tutorials". If you have a little free time and are curious, you should spend a few hours on YouTube and give your curiosity free rein. Where does that lead? That's just it: I don't know beforehand. My first "learning experience" was following a monkey peeling a banana. I had been doing it "wrong" all my life until then. Never mind, not important! But, I have it stored away as an impression to this day.

There are also learning institutions that help this coincidence along. Philipp Schmidt of the MIT Media Lab once mentioned in a lecture that students at the MIT Media Lab have to walk a long way to get to their project groups. Along the way, they pass other project stations. Sometimes they stop there because they are asked something or find something interesting. This is an intentional coincidence.

Self-determined adult education at the Third Space

Getting in the way of chance is one criterion for what we call a Third Space. While we each use the space of work (the Second Space after Oldenburg) or the home (the First Space) as a matter of

course, public spaces are increasingly limited in their availability. Mostly they are commercial spaces. The Third Space is also a feel-good space. I feel welcome. The visit costs nothing. Which adult education facility lives up to this claim? The seminar room is the destination and that's what we strive for again. A Third Space invites you to linger. There are definitely very different, here and there also contradictory needs. Intimate and hidden or rather publicly visible, loud or quiet - just to name a few.

I can decide for myself what I want to do. For example, I want to digitize my hives. I want to know how "my" bees are doing. I look for the offer in vain in the numerous course programs, which I quite understand. I don't want to buy the equipment needed for this, I want to build it myself, although I have no idea. An e-mail to FabLab Lübeck led me to my goal. I will start building there, supported by experts. The FabLab is also a variant of a third place. Thematically not completely open, because it is about analog and digital tools for the implementation of own ideas and prototypes, but always self-determined. No learning according to chapters, but adapted to the wishes. There are also no teachers in front of me, but other people who want to share their knowledge with me. Makerspaces or Repair Cafés also belong in this series of new meeting spaces.

The Third Space also opens up opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. For example, in Cologne's public library, where people without a teacher arrange to meet and exchange ideas. Whoever shows up - no minimum number of participants, a date and topic pinned to the bulletin board, and then wait and see whether the idea meets with a response (see also the presentation of a collaboration between the Cologne City Library and MIT).

Starbucks also wants to be such a Third Space. Because people open their notebooks there and write e-mails, it's not a meeting space for me. It's a commercial space that offers no infrastructure other than tables, chairs and food. Well, WIFI, but otherwise...That also applies to co-working spaces. Here, there is a big hurdle for access: co-working is a commercial space, even if it otherwise redeems many of the things that make Third Spaces so appealing. A Third Space should generally not be commercial. It otherwise loses a chance to unfold its impact as a freely accessible space.

Third Space as an enabling space

The Third Space is an enabling space. Many libraries are currently addressing this issue. From the layout here, they already offer some possibilities, because their rooms are already open and their staff advises and accompanies visitors. It is therefore a smaller step to becoming a truly Third Space than for educational institutions that lock their rooms or only open them for courses.

But it is not only for visitors that the Third Space offers many possibilities. It is also a benefit for the operators of these places. Learning from the visitors is a good opportunity to generate your own knowledge for organized education. And maybe that is the reason for my enthusiasm. The Third Space is the invitation to open learning spaces, to open one's own perspective. To not always think of one's own offering, but to see an enabling space as an extension of one's own work. It is always about the users and not about the participants. A subtle but decisive difference. And whoever now thinks: A red sofa will do, should take a look at some examples from Scandinavia and Holland.

The Norderstedt Bildungshaus could be the light at the end of German educational separatism. In 2021, a new building is to be completed there, in which the adult education center, the city library and the city archive will design a joint third location. I was able to accompany the project in the first phase and my enthusiasm knows hardly any bounds. Also because Aat Vos could be won as interior architect. His work so far reflects the intention of the Third Space beautifully.

