

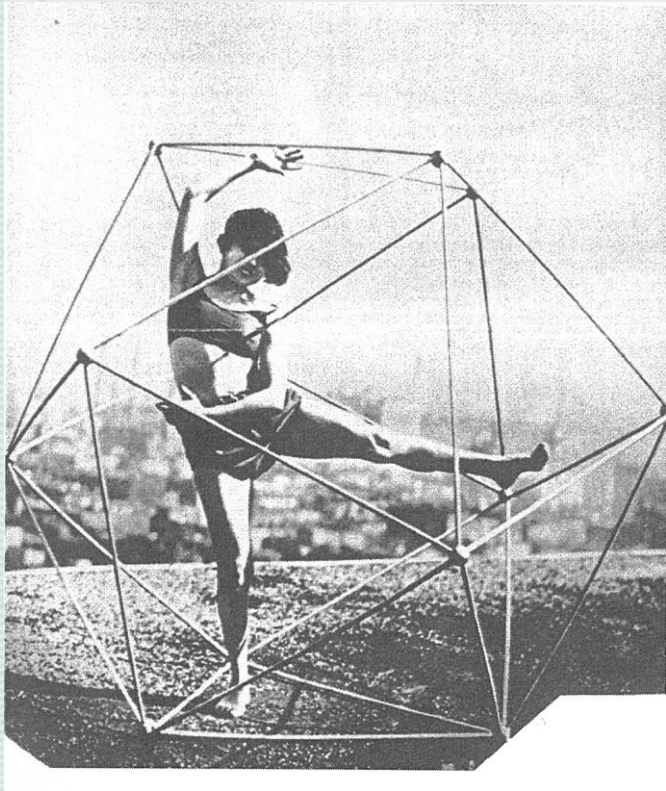
Space



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Introduction to the dimension of space



Mathildemultiple

Space refers to the overall use of the environment, someone's personal space and interpersonal use of space. Space is everything that surrounds us in three-dimensions: the physical space (the classroom with all the furniture and objects), the air, the light, the sounds, the space between the people in the space, and our immediate personal space. On a first, objective level our presence in space is a combination of these factors. What's more, space – or our use of it – also has a cultural, symbolic level. We don't perceive space and distances neutrally and objectively, but assign specific meanings to specific places, to the dimension of space we use, and to the distance we allow between each other. Below we explain these three factors, and the next slides explore space in the context of adult education.

General Space: General space is the actual space or environment that we move in, like the room we are in or the street. In human society all physical space is also social space, inviting a set of associations, and appropriate codes of conduct that are connected to specific groups. The school, the workplace, the church are as much physical spaces as spaces of hierarchically ordered relations, rituals and conventions.

Do you have favourite spaces? What are they like? What is your working environment like? Is it spacious or restricted? Are there many people or are you alone? What do you need to feel at ease there? Where do you feel most comfortable in this space? How do you move in it?

Personal Space: The personal space (or personal bubble) is the space around us within reaching distance of our limbs. We call this the "kinesphere". Our bodies use the three-dimensional directions: up/down, right/left and forward/backward. People will occupy smaller or bigger "bubbles" as a consequence of their cultural prescriptions, personality and the context. When do you use smaller or bigger bubbles? What do you think of someone who takes a lot of space or occupies just a little space?

Interpersonal Space: The interpersonal space describes the space between two or more people and how we negotiate the relationship: by being closer or further apart; above or below the other: next to or opposite each other. Each culture sets guidelines for what physical distance is appropriate for specific and different relationships.

How is space relevant in adult education?

For educators it is important to gain more awareness of how they use space and what may be the learners' preferences. There are 'given' factors such as 'norms' - cultural habits of teaching. These will determine how we organize and operate in the learning space. To what extent is the space safe and 'comfortable' for the educator and for learners? How do we relate to the rules of the learning space? What is the role/position of the educator: 'leading' the students or 'holding' the space for them? How do we relate to the physical characteristics of the space (size, furniture, lights, materials, openness-closeness, decorations, etc.)? The answers are present in an 'embodied' way: how we move, speak, interact. And how do we connect our use of space to interactivity, time, sound, music, emotions, imagination? In the educator's repertoire these might help create interpersonal bonding, foster creativity and deepen the learning experience.

General space

Adult educators use and relate to the space around them according to their more or less conscious choices and / or according to general rules and social norms. There is a long tradition of frontal education where the educator occupies a privileged part of the space (the front) and monopolizes the right to speak. What the teacher says is seen as more relevant than what the learners can say. The organization of the teaching space is a direct reflection of the institutionalized hierarchy of relationship between the educator and the learners.

Photo by U.S. Department of Education



Personal space

Our perception of the personal space others use is densely packed with stereotypes which we may recognize from the self-help, body-language manuals: the person using a big personal space is supposed to be confident and assertive, while the person using a small space is shy or humble. The truth is, personality is not the only factor. Our use of personal space is deeply ingrained with cultural expectations (what is polite, respectful and appropriate). Equally, we adjust our movements according to the context. A language teacher may feel she wants to reduce her usually wide gestures and movements, so that she does not scare learners coming from cultures where gestures and spaces tend to be more discreet. Another educator may opt for big gestures to attract attention, motivate and dynamize her group.

How is interpersonal space relevant in adult education?

Depending on the subject, the time, the culture and the teaching context educators might play more with proximity: reducing the distance, sitting in a circle, sitting at the same height, playing with furniture (sitting bags instead of chairs for example) or moving in the space. These choices can stimulate attention and help to create a more equal connection. This change of attitude can be in line with a different teaching strategy: asking more questions, inviting students to share their knowledge, taking steps towards participatory learning. Nonetheless, frontal teaching can be equally as 'good' as a less 'formal' environment: non-formal educational spaces risk being intimidating if participants are already used to other more formal ways of learning.

Awareness of these issues can help educators develop greater flexibility and freedom in the design of the learning environment, and, therefore, achieve a more joyful and mutually beneficial learning experience for both themselves and their learners.



Questions for self-assessment

Questions to answer before watching your video

Open questions

- Are you aware of how you use your environment and your personal space in everyday life ? And in your educational work?
- What does the way you use the space tell you about your style and priorities in your work as an educator?
- How do you change your use of space under stress?

Questions you can use to take quantitative measurement

Please answer using the 1 to 5 scale where 1 stands for "not at all" and 5 for "very much"

To what extent are you aware of the way you use space?

To what extent you think you occupy a lot of space with your body?

To what extent do you enjoy playing around with space during your education/training activity?

To what extent you think you occupy a lot of space with your voice?

To what extent does being stressed influence your use of space?

After watching your video

Watching the video what do you observe about how you use space?

Do you have any preferences to where you are stretching towards or retreating from (left/right, up/down etc.)

How big is your 'bubble'?

What is the distance between you and the learners?

Do you feel like changing anything in your use of space?

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