

Engaging in Spaces

How mature distance students fit study into their homes and lives

Ella R. Kahu

School of Psychology, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand
e.r.kahu@massey.ac.nz

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RHETORIC

*"you simply study when,
where and how you want"*

University website

Distance study, alongside increasing use of technology, is said to overcome the barriers of space and time. To fit study into complex lives, a third of mature aged (over 24 years) tertiary students in New Zealand study by distance (Ministry of Education, 2011). But space and time must still be found and blurring the physical boundaries between study and home creates new challenges. Few studies have looked at physical spaces, yet the availability of appropriate learning spaces determines not just when and where students study, but also the quality of their engagement. Students are advised to set up a quiet separate study area in their home. But is that possible? Is it always the best option?

RESEARCH

*How do distance students
manage their learning
spaces in the context of
their family?*

- Nineteen first year distance students aged over 24; diverse in age, family status, ethnicity, and location.
- Semi structured interviews with students and their families at the start of the semester focussing on preparation, expectations, and motivation.
- Weekly Skype video diaries throughout the semester talking about their study experiences and what was influencing their study.
- Follow up interviews including families after semester ended.
- Thematic analysis identifying the influences on student engagement.

REALITIES

An Appropriate Space

Students thought they knew what an appropriate space was – isolated and quiet. But that wasn't always possible and it didn't always work. Some liked background noise and some disliked being isolated. Many were torn between their own preferences and university advice. Access to technology was important.

*You have to experiment with
study to find what works for
you.*

*I didn't like feeling isolated, which it kind
of should be for study ... it was an
unconscious struggle between where I
wanted to be and where I felt like I was
supposed to be*

A Shared Space

The home is not a dedicated learning space. As well as being shared with other people, it was also associated with different roles – parenting, domestic chores, and relaxation – and these roles impacted on the ability to study. Technology too was shared with family and access had to be negotiated.

*You're in that relaxed state, if that makes
sense, you're in your, at home, ... so I think
that's why, I got probably most of my good
work done, actually at work.*

*I found the gym was a really good place
to study because I'm not sitting at
home, I'm not looking at my massive
washing pile going, s**t I need to fold
that.*

Supporting Space

A key influence on the choice of strategy, and therefore the access to quality learning spaces, was support from family. Some partners prioritised the study and enabled space, while others were frustrated by the impact that study had on their lives.

*Just give them all the space they need for
their study, support them, you will tend to
know when they are engrossed in their
study and not to disturb them.*

*It does kind of restrict, in that I can't
just go to the piano and play because
I know he finds the noise distracting.*

*I did manage to sit in the hospital cafe and,
in the 2.5 hours she was in surgery, I think I got
800 words done. It wasn't good so quite a lot
of it got rewritten.*

Managing Space

Students used three strategies: Temporal separation, studying when home was empty, gave quality space but relied on time in the family schedule. Physical separation, hiding away or studying out of the home, depended on support from others. Dovetailing, weaving study alongside other roles and tasks, relied less on other people but gave poorer quality space.

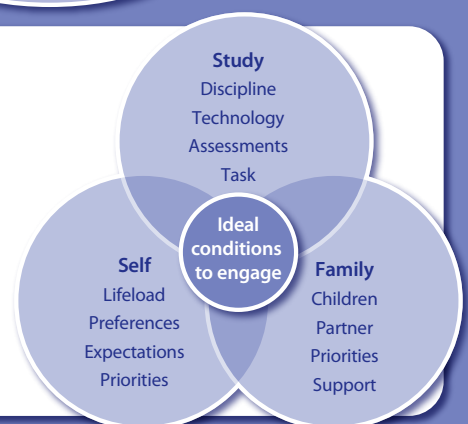
*I didn't want [the children] to be
disadvantaged. So three o'clock
came, all study stopped.*

*Because [work] will be quiet,
because there will be no one
there and there is a proper
computer to use.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The quality of learning spaces that students can access impacts on their ability to engage deeply with their study. The ideal space lies at the intersection of three, sometimes competing, demands. But this is a learning curve – students need to experiment to find ways that work for themselves, their study, and their family. While this is the students' responsibility, the university can help:

- Current advice is simplistic and generic. Rather than being told simply to set up a quiet separate study, students should be told of the specific challenges they may face, and possible solutions they could try.
- Target support services for mature aged distance students to enable these students to connect with each other and to discuss and share ideas on the challenges of finding space and time to study.



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