

Reimagine Future Learning Spaces, SMU Labs, 12 March 2018

Professor Arnoud De Meyer's opening speech

Colleagues, Friends and Staff

A very good morning to everyone and a warm welcome to SMU and SMU Labs

This morning's seminar on 'Reimagining Future Learning Spaces' is a very timely one as the role of physical spaces on learning and psychology is becoming more and more important in this fast changing globally connected world where most of us are working, living and interacting with each other virtually.

Teaching, learning, and indeed the entire context in which universities operate, has changed significantly over the last decade. Predictions that virtual learning would signal the death of the university campus have been wrong. Students continue to spend time on campus, especially SMU which is right at the heart of the City, surrounded by both the Heritage District and business, well connected to the transport network, easy access to a wide range of facilities. Usage of learning spaces at SMU keeps increasing every year.

We have created many new innovative informal learning spaces at SMU over the last 4 years, such as this one, SMU Labs, new learning spaces in Li Ka Shing Library, new student lounges near the Campus Green and the new SOL Building with a brand new Law Library, Kwa Geok Choo Law Library with its unique architecture. All with distinct characteristics to respond to different needs equipped with innovative technologies, well-designed facilities and welcoming/inspiring ambience.

Universities have recognised the need to invest in both formal and informal learning spaces to support the student experience on campus. This includes the need to balance innovative and collaborative informal learning spaces with more formal lecture theatres and seminar rooms. We are moving away from desk and chair workspaces to providing a range of types of furniture and deploying a variety of technologies. We are also seeing a shift where these facilities are located, with the development of more learning hubs and libraries as learning spaces, with 24/7 spaces. For example, SMU Libraries are the most popular learning spaces on campus with a variety of settings ranging from small discussion rooms to individual study areas to special lounges for graduate students. Our students see these spaces as their home. They literally live in them.

The SMU Labs is the space for SMU-X to bring together faculty, students and industry partners to solve real-world issues in experiential learning projects. SMU-X is about collaborative mindset. What you see in the SMU Labs today is also a collaboration between SMU and Ascott to experiment and create new co-working space concepts through SMU-X courses.

As universities adopt more flexible learning, project-based learning, blended learning pedagogies, students are able to devote more time to discussing and applying information and knowledge they have read, viewed or listened to before scheduled classes. Many universities are changing to project-based and blended learning models, where students work collaboratively. SMU is a pioneer in the area of interactive pedagogy, small classes, innovative technologies and experiential learning.

As educators we need to think about entire campuses as learning spaces and consider the seamless flow of different types of learning activity as well as the overall range of provision.

Collaboration in planning, designing, evaluating usage and managing learning spaces is essential amongst architects, designers, faculty, librarians, learning specialists and facilities managers.. Such developments, whether new buildings or refurbishment, are complex projects representing a substantial financial investment with a significant lifespan. No one professional group has enough knowledge to make the best decisions alone. This morning's seminar is an excellent example of this approach, bringing together speakers from a variety of backgrounds to address different aspects of learning spaces, challenges and opportunities.