The Spirit of ‘WE’ in the Learning Environment: ‘WE LEARN’—A Space for Students and Teachers to Become

Anat Mor-Avi

Abstract This chapter advances the idea that in order to improve twenty-first-century learning environments for students and particularly for teachers, it is necessary to enhance the spirit of collective culture, called ‘WE’, versus the spirit of individualism, called ‘I’, and provides an example of how this is reflected in the design of learning spaces. Both of these cohorts use learning, working and doing processes, and face major changes from educational mandates. A ‘WE’ cultural environment will be discussed in order to support multiple aspects of collaboration and creativity, where hub-specific solutions empower the two groups as collectives, supporting a ‘WE LEARN HUB’ setting. Connecting practice to research, a process of change in school design related to the ‘WE’ culture is presented through an academic park built in Israel. This academic park uses an introductory design of the hub’s setting approach, supporting the ‘WE’ of both communities and reflecting new approaches in learning processes.

Introduction

Formerly, the goals of education and the design of learning places were based on a homogenised factory-like model (Scott-Webber, 2004). The new model of twenty-first-century’s educational practices advocates the creation of knowledgeable and adaptable people who can develop and share new knowledge with others and influence a new economy (Robinson, 2011). Passive learning is gradually being replaced by active learning to enhance the motivation, curiosity, creativity, and collaboration skills in learners.

The idea of learning as a dynamic, multi-directional process, which acts as a social and playful one, creates a challenge to define spaces for learning geared towards certain activities, while opposing past centuries’ practices. It is suggested here that we need to explore wider ideas and agendas; as author Boys (2011) introduces in her book *Toward Creative Learning Spaces*, learning is not a linear process (see Fig. 1).

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W. Imms and T. Kvan (eds.), *Teacher Transition into Innovative Learning Environments*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-7497-9_22

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Fig. 1 Learning is a dynamic process (adapted from Boys, 2011)

Today, students as well as teachers are thought to be learners. Education is evolving, incorporating the knowledge of how we learn and the ways to enhance students' and teachers' collaboration and motivation (Boys, 2011). According to psychologist Sawyer (2007), creativity is always collaborative. Organizations that want to change for the better should encourage collaborative group settings, moving to team organization, enhancing their own reserves of creativity, and distributing leadership.

In his book *Group Genius*, Sawyer (2007) refers to many innovations that affect our lives, which emerge from group genius. The unique power of collaboration generates unique interacting opportunities resulting in a string of successive ideas—each spark lighting the next and enhancing creative solutions and innovations. 'When we collaborate, creativity unfolds across people; the sparks fly faster, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts', writes Sawyer (2007, p. 7). In an effective creative community, innovation emerges over time and from the bottom up, enhancing deep listening that helps build ideas as extensions of the preceding ones, and transforming ideas into good questions and outcomes (Sawyer, 2007).

Similarly, Clapp writes in the book *Participatory Creativity* (2017) that creativity, like learning, is a social process circulated through the class by participation, not a process that happens in isolation. He also argues that reframing the understanding of creativity as a socially distributed process is a necessary first step to ensure that a greater number of learners gain access to creative learning experiences, through which they will further develop their own creativity. Collaboration is central to creativity (Clapp, 2017). Adding to this claim, Robinson (2011) too suggests that 'creativity is about connections and is usually driven more by collaboration than by solo efforts' (p. 211).

The notion that learning and the learner are affected both by technology and by knowledge of the way we learn suggests that social values in schools should assume greater importance (Scott-Webber, 2014). However, in reality the collaborative culture of teachers and students in learning environments is in constant flux, complex and includes many old paradigms. The changes towards a more collaborative culture of learning and working affect both the teachers and the students, as separate groups as well as a united group, and are subsequently summed up.

Students: From Being Served to Peer-to-Peer Learning

Students learn best when working together (Beichner et al., 2007). In addition, better retention and achievement are influenced, by far, from peer involvement and student–teacher interactions. Therefore, students are encouraged to collaborate and learn to become team members rather than being passive listeners. These changes, however, are challenging, in view of longstanding assumptions that traditional environments are crucial to serious learning and success—a clear indication of behavioural conditioning according to Scott-Webber (2004). How may these changes begin to happen?

Teachers: From Lonely Superheroes to Group Wisdom

A starting point for change is the teacher, and some of the best resources for teacher success are their colleagues. Hence, the collaborative culture is equally important for teachers. Grose (2014) suggests that effective shifting of teachers' practices in order to address the changes in today's education is achieved when teachers are enabled to shape changes both collaboratively and collectively. In addition, after a history of closed doors and teaching conducted in traditional ways, it is essential that teachers are equipped with time, space, and incentives to perform as interest-driven individuals in a collaborative culture, while each individual may enrich the system by virtue of his or her specialization, strength, and uniqueness. This culture should be similar to the practices conducted in future-oriented organizations (Hattie, 2009), whereby the workforce is in the process of shifting from individual-focused work towards 'WE' activities empowered by collaborative spaces (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Teachers and Students: Empowering Engagement Skills

The culture of collaboration must also be applied between students and teachers. In a study by Ray and Kafka (2014), it has been argued that despite the understanding that student–teacher interactions have a positive influence on students' skills of engagement, only 14% of surveyed graduates reported actively engaging with teachers. It would seem that traditional pedagogical approaches, lecture type classes and row-settings are still considered a more serious and safe learning model by many students and teachers. In a similar vein, Hattie asserted at a 2017 lecture on the topic of collaboration that although the importance of collaboration is clear, it is difficult to scale up the sense of collaboration among all users in the learning process as a culture.

Employing architectural attributes to build a learning culture based on connectedness and collaboration could be a powerful catalyst to sustaining those changes. These attributes should reflect the meaning of connectedness and the notion of 'WE', which will be explored in the following sections, through the prism of culture, behaviour, and environment.

Connectedness and Collectiveness

Many current approaches to education are based on collaborative processes. Collaboration is necessary for creativity in its contemporary concept, in order for it to flourish. Social culture and the act of collectiveness (i.e. the quality or state of being collective) could support it. Connectedness has been defined by Goodenow (1993) as 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment' (p. 80). Goodenow (1993) also reports that school connectedness has been found to correlate strongly and positively with students' academic motivation and with indexes of school performance and adjustment. In addition, a study by Shochet, Dadds, Ham, and Montague (2006) noted that school connectedness is an under-emphasized parameter in adolescent mental health. Therefore, it is crucial to create a holistic culture of connectedness and collectiveness among students and particularly teachers—the 'WE' culture, as it is called in the present study. To fully identify the aspects of 'WE', the current social and cultural changes need to be considered.

Culture Change

In the digital era we are willingly becoming less private and less individual. New social, cultural, and economic patterns are shaping a new kind of collectiveness empowered by individuals acting in collective actions (ex. crowdsourcing, crowd-funding, and crowd wisdom). We are moving from a society of individuals to a society of collective individuals, a new collective, the new 'WE', where the act of collectiveness is performed and is not related to the ideologies and aims of collectivism of the past. The new 'WE' is unique in that it is a dynamic notion, such that one may be part of many collectives, or multiple 'WE's.

The power of the crowd indicates that we are smarter and more creative when together and supports the argument that we ought to create more collaborative cultures (Nagar, 2011; Surowiecki, 2004). Trust, Krutka, and Carpenter (2016) support this notion by stating that isolation is the enemy of improvement. The state of non-isolation derives from the more basic concept noted by Lieberman (2014) that the most fundamental human need is to connect with others.

Although in flux, the common culture is still 'I'-oriented, evoking concern as noted by philosopher Martin (2016). Martin suggests that two major, forgotten concepts be

included in the educational agenda: (a) three Cs—Care, Concern, and Connection, and (b) extensively expanding the 'WE' definition—in school, in society and even when referring to our planet. It seems that those missing Cs are budding in social platforms where interest-driven individuals join a collective action. Individuals in such groups are considered to be more creative in comparison to those in other types of groups (Goncalo & Staw, 2006).

The goal-oriented individuals often collaborate through online platforms which, according to Trust et al. (2016), are growing and empowering the users. However, Jenkins, Ito, and Boyd (2016, p. 7) advised that instead of thinking of technologies in isolation, 'we would do better to take an ecological approach' and promote physical encounters in learning communities. While Seelig (2012) observes that educational environments and learning culture may repress students' creativity, it is clear that the design of learning spaces should holistically embrace the social and cultural patterns of collaboration, reflecting the social and goal-oriented connections for all users.

Environmental Behaviour

Behaviour that is involved in engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and positive attitude towards peers, teachers, and learning, enhances the level of connectedness in schools. Evidence shows that synergy between pedagogy and the environment has a positive influence on the behaviour of students and teachers, as well as on soft skills necessary for the twenty-first century, such as engagement and collaboration. In the current social shift, individuals are encouraged to share their skills and knowledge in collective activities, in order to empower the collective (WE) and advance their personal achievements (I). The current shift should be presented holistically by new patterns of relations in the educational landscape, where fulfilled students and teachers act as compassionate collectives. Therefore, empowering each cohort's community (i.e. students and teachers), as two groups of individual learners acting in collective activities, may be the basis for encouraging a 'WE' community that supports new relationships.

A Relation-Shift in Learning-Driven Environments

In view of the ongoing culture flux, it seems that the relationship between the 'I', the 'ME' and the 'WE' are being challenged. The 'I' is the inner aspect of the person, while the 'ME' represents one's social aspect, namely what is learned in interaction with the surroundings and other people's thoughts and attitudes. The 'ME' includes knowledge of both the environment and of society, in addition to one's sense of self (Meads, 1967). Therefore, being a strong social 'ME' empowers the 'WE' culture in learning-driven environments (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 The ME + WE > I concept

These concepts are understood as fluid and often changing between different cultures, regions, and environments. It has been suggested by the literature that, for many reasons, we are individuals who should be connected in creating a shift towards new relationship patterns, described as a 'Relation-Shift' (Hertzberger, 2008) where strong individuals create strong social- and interest-driven collectives. Therefore, pedagogy, users' attitude and space should integrate to become the catalyst for a 'WE' culture in schools, with the space encouraging connectedness among all users.

The Meaning of 'WE' Espouses the Argument for Collaboration, Creativity, and Leadership from Inside-Out

In view of all of the above, there is a perceived need to empower both teachers and students by creating a spirit of communal learning culture by encouraging the social 'ME' and the 'WE' for each group, versus the spirit of individualism, the 'I'. This is particularly necessary for teachers, given that teachers' spaces still illustrate signs of isolation (Scott-Webber, 2017).

A key message in Hattie's book *Visual Learning* (2009) is that what works best for the students is similar to what works best for teachers. Visual learning is one of the fundamental pillars of openness and sharing in education that enhance the connection and the networking between learners of both groups. The 'WE' correlates with the idea calling for education to be treated as a public and communal domain. Therefore, the 'WE' concept has the potential to empower (a) peer gathering, (b) task or interest-related connections, and (c) collaborating in informal and formal knowledge-sharing places.

The school is where learning and working converge with two major groups of users in different doing and learning modes. The qualities of progressive, creative workplaces and innovation labs should become integrated into twenty-first-century learning places. Thinking, learning, and doing should be made more visible, and the notion of the user experience (UX) of formal learning is then supported in an informal setting. This suggestion is supported by Covey's principles (as cited in Fonzi & Ritchie, 2011), which are based on three beliefs calling for leadership by choice and not by hierarchical model: (1) 'All individuals, including students, are given the opportunity to lead (p. 3)'; (2) All people regardless of age, race, class, gender, or disability should develop skills such as leadership, accountability, adaptability, and problem solving; (3) 'Innovation will be diffused through a ripple effect from

teachers and staff members to...students and the surrounding community (p. 4)'. Covey's idea, which he defines as *inside-out leadership*, emphasizes the importance of empowering the collective culture.

Therefore, the spaces enabling a 'WE' culture should provide qualities for collaboration and interactions as well as leadership without a hierarchical culture. The ability of the teachers to collaborate could become a model for the students. Thus, a hub which includes design attributes such as transparency, mobility, and proximity between students and teachers' spaces are to be considered.

Creating Hubs for Students and Teachers: A Potential Model

Environments have very important impact on forming behavioural patterns (Scott-Webber, 2004; Senge, 1990). Hence, the nature of the 'where' in the learning environment should be empowered. Architectural attributes that empower the 'WE' culture of learning environments should be promoted holistically in school design. The 'WE' cultural structure should offer spatial formations optimizing innovative approaches to learning and working. One idea is to have innovative labs for each group, with a shared space in-between to support students' and teachers' development together as team players, in order to promote connectedness in learning-driven environments. This should be done through visual thinking, learning, and working, as conducted in many other organizations and innovation labs, thereby exploring the design attributes of mobility, proximity, and transparency. These attributes are introduced in this study, in a three-area learning hub model, the '2 + 1 WEHUB' (see Fig. 3), supporting:

Fig. 3 The 2 + 1 WEHUB model

Fig. 4 2 + 1 WEHUB model—through WE, ME and I

1. Students' hub for learning and doing.
2. Teachers' hub for academic working and learning.
3. Interconnecting hub designed for both students and teachers to connect and collaborate.

The '2 + 1 WEHUB' model creates the opportunities for students and teachers to increase the potential for operating as two groups, independently and jointly. Accordingly, the spaces reflect each of the collective needs while the third place hosts both collectives for learning and working together. Simultaneously, the WEHUB supports the needs of the individual 'I', the 'ME' (the social I) within the 'WE' culture, by creating healthy relationships between private, public, formal, informal, self-guided, and collaborative spaces (Fig. 4).

The process in school design, which responds to these dynamic needs and changes, will be discussed in a case study of a three-school Academic Park located in Israel, representing the evolution of the connectedness culture in schools.

A Glance at an Ongoing Change in Practice—From Small Gestures to a New Paradigm

In Ganey Tikva, a fast-growing township in the center of Israel, an academic park (GTAC) is being developed which includes a library-incubator for innovation, an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. Despite the need to follow the

Fig. 5 GTAC: Eliot elementary school 2016

Ministry of Education's strict and traditional programme, an opportunity to observe the gradual change in the physical layout is evident. In early 2016, Eliot Elementary School (1st–6th grades) was inaugurated, offering a small common area for alternative study in-between the traditional classrooms (see Fig. 5).

In September 2016, the adjacent Meitar HS (9th–12th grades) was inaugurated, offering open classrooms as study halls for students to collaborate, while the teachers' working areas were kept apart. The school's pedagogical principles are collaboration, listening and responsibility, and all communities involved are expected to become open sources for all. In addition, Meitar HS was chosen as a lab for future pedagogical strategy innovation by the Ministry of Education, thereby promoting a unique experimental future-oriented curriculum for teachers, students, and the community. Accordingly, the main architectural attribute offers full transparency qualities for professional and alternative spaces, and partial transparency qualities for the home-rooms. Also, all classrooms were equipped with movable furniture and accessories inviting the sharing of ideas and collaboration (see Fig. 6).

It is important to note that in Meitar HS, the teachers who are most open to change and embrace the collaboration culture are second-career teachers who convey qualities from various disciplines of the high-tech culture. In Meitar HS, 64% of teachers joined the educational field from other domains. This reflects a phenomenon in Israel whereby, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, more than 25% of the teachers come from the high-tech fields to join the educational system of 1st–12th grades. Hence, it is necessary to provide them with spaces reflecting the collaboration qualities to which they are accustomed and to support them in leading the change. Consequently, the design of the middle school, which is connected academically to Meitar HS, was influenced accordingly. Further factors impacting on the design include informal remarks by educators of the Research & Development Department at the Israel Ministry of Education, which have been gathered to shed light on the additional desired qualities for the 'WE' culture formation:

Fig. 6 GT academic park: Meitar high school 2016–17

1. Students' 'WEHUB' should have qualities of makers' workshop with physical and mental opportunities for connections and collaboration.
2. Teachers' 'WEHUB' should support an informal gathering space as 'kitchenette time' and non-schooling functions, to encourage communicating, working, and resting in settings which enhance the principle of participatory leadership as introduced by Moeller, the co-founder of 'Art of Hosting' (Moeller, n.d.).
3. The interconnected 'WEHUB' should have the qualities of a mentoring hub with different scales of encounters.
4. Motivating terminology should be used.

Accordingly, the design of the middle school, planned for 7th–9th grades, reflects the '2 + 1 HUB' model supporting the act of connectedness for all users. This school, inaugurated in September 2018, adopts meaningful strategies towards the culture of change in learning. A new layout was introduced, whereby all areas that are not homerooms will function as hubs for learning and doing—providing informal, formal, private, and public qualities for each group and in the interconnecting area. This 'WEHUB' will include 'WE LEARN' areas for students and 'WE WORK' for teachers on the same floor, all to support connectedness through mobility, proximities, and visual relations via transparency (see Figs. 7 and 8).

The three schools represent a process of change in the architecture of schools towards patterns introduced in collaborative culture organizations, by including opportunities for all users to collaborate in informal while defined settings. However, adopting changes is a complex process for all users, and it is therefore necessary to evaluate the connection between education and design (Imms, Cleveland, & Fisher, 2016). While most of the research on creativity within organizations focuses on psychological and social aspects of engagement, there is a lack of inclusive research regarding building environments for creativity, and the complex relationship between space, creative behaviour, and innovation (Groves & Marlow 2016). Future steps are needed to connect practice and research through examples such as the 'WEHUB' model introduced in this chapter.

Fig. 7 GT academic park: middle school 3rd floor; WEHUB plan

Fig. 8 GT academic park: middle school 3rd floor; WEHUB bird eye view

Summary

This chapter discusses the theory underlying collaborative learning and the benefits of enhancing the spirit of 'WE' for teachers as well as for students versus the spirit of 'I', in learning environments. Ganey Tikva's Academic Park was introduced as a case study in the transformation towards informal learning and working environment areas for students and teachers. Moreover, this chapter contends that based on the phenomenon in Israel whereby many teachers join the educational system from a corporate-collaboration culture, it is vital to address the teachers' particular need for

environments that support and empower their abilities to perform as a collective in collaborative patterns. Accordingly, a ‘WEHUB’-like setting was introduced in the middle school last designed at the Academic Park, where the art of collaboration can be performed among students and teachers as separate groups that are occasionally combined. The architecture of the ‘WEHUB’ nurtures connectedness by enhancing visual relations through transparency, supporting informal opportunities by proximity, encouraging participation and creativity through mobility—all in order to hopefully augment the wisdom of the collectives in school.

Acknowledgements Data utilized in this research was obtained in adherence to the required ethical protocol of the author’s host institution. All images and diagrams are the property of the author, or the author has obtained consent to use them from the appropriate copyright owner.

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