

Coworking Design Learning in the *Underground/Middleground/Upperground*

A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

We intend to explore a conceptual framework based on three lines of thinking/work from Patrick Cohendet (*Underground/Middleground/Upperground*), Ray Oldenburg (*The Great Good Place*), and Fred Garnett (heutagogy or self-determined learning). To demonstrate the relevance and feasibility of such a concept we review the key factors and definitions of these authors and their work. Additionally, a brief comparison between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework is presented. Moreover, this paper aims to help map our research work within the context of the Doctoral Programme in Design at IADE / Universidade Europeia, which triangulates Coworking, Design Learning, and Heutagogy. Ultimately, the aim is to generate new knowledge for a *Coworking Design Learning* model to be presented in our final doctoral document.

Keywords: Design Learning, Underground-Middleground-Upperground, Coworking, Conceptual Framework.

INTRODUCTION

Being a designer, a Coworking space founder and operator, a Design teacher, and a Ph.D. on Design student, I and my supervisors found ourselves right in the middle of an interesting situation. At the beginning of this Doctoral programme, we decided that it would be challenging and useful to research and investigate the bridging of possibilities between Coworking spaces, as new “work&learn” spaces, and the myriad of new models for Design learning.

Surprisingly, the first searches and reading for our investigation showed evidence of a lack of relevant literature connecting both fields, i.e Design Education/Learning, and the Coworking global movement. Moreover, given the wide spread of Design methodologies, and the adoption of Design Thinking into so many fields and industries, it is truly surprising that the number of books on Design Teaching is so small (Davis, 2017). Equally scarce is the literature on the Coworking movement, mainly due to its informal genesis, although the last years have seen an exponential increase in more relevant literature from researchers and scholars from interdisciplinary fields. A good

starting point is the Coworking Library (<https://coworkinglibrary.com/>) ('Coworking Library', n.d.).

Perhaps the most challenging problem we have been facing since our initial research work was choosing either an existing theoretical structure for our thesis or designing a new conceptual one. It is important to point out that this is a common problem among doctoral students, and that this paper aims to reinforce the difference between theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Ultimately, we decided to approach three concepts related to our first exploratory studies. Firstly, we looked to better understand how the Design Education field is mapped nowadays, tentatively identifying its connection with new learning approaches, and the broader social contexts of our times. To illustrate this, Cohendet's trilogy *Underground, Middleground, and Upperground* (Cohendet, Grandadam, & Simon, 2010) seemed to fit our purpose. Additionally, two other concepts grabbed our attention. *From Access to Content to Context* is a free and independent line of thinking from Fred Garnett's *The Heutagogy Archives* (Garnett, n.d.) investigating new learning processes [and new learners]. Finally, we needed to find an angle from which to fit the Coworking movement within this research investigation, and for that purpose, *The Great Good Place* (Oldenburg, 1999) is an unsurpassed classic on the *third place*, a term coined by the author back in 1989. Oldenburg identifies three core factors in the *third place*: open and free access to all; users as [social] levelers; and free conversation.

COWORKING DESIGN LEARNING. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

What is a Conceptual Framework?

A Conceptual Framework is used as a lens to observe and understand a particular phenomenon – within a given research project – from the point of view of other researchers (Maxwell, 2012). Moreover, such a lens provides a map to the researcher's studies and its inter-connections in line with the research project.

Theoretical vs Conceptual Framework

Although not absolutely consensual, many authors agree on making a distinction between theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Wikipedia is not an usual reference when it comes to academic work and design research but we venture to transcript here the first lines of 'Conceptual framework' article as it specifically addresses our need of an overall picture:

A conceptual framework is an analytical tool with several variations and contexts. It can be applied in different categories of work where an overall picture is needed. It is used to make conceptual distinctions and organize ideas. Strong conceptual frameworks capture something real and do this in a way that is easy to remember and apply. ('Conceptual framework', 2019)

Maxwell notes that a conceptual framework differs from a theoretical framework. In fact, while a conceptual framework maps the researcher's intentions and knowledge on a given problematic, a theoretical framework embodies other researcher's theories aiming to explain particular phenomena (Maxwell, 2012).

Therefore, a conceptual framework consists of an interconnected range of concepts within a less formal structure as opposed to more formal existing theory which in our

case we found less applicable. Moreover, because conceptual frameworks often result in empirical observation and intuition, we found it more in line with our current research work. Nevertheless, we expect to deduce theories from such a conceptual framework.

The general purpose of this conceptual framework is to organize and clarify the three concepts presented here, finding the relevant relationships among them. We aim to build a context for interpreting further study findings and observations. Finally, we are looking for theory development that is at all levels relevant to Design practice.

Coworking as “The Great Good Place”

According to Oldenburg, a *third place* is not the private domestic space (home) neither the institutional place (formal institutions) but instead the community space, shared and used by all as an escape from home and work (Oldenburg, 1999). Nonetheless, the author notes that the *third place* is not merely what remains from those two other spaces. In fact, it is the *neutral ground* kind of spaces where individuals have free and open access; a non-hierarchical mode (individuals act as *levelers*); a home away from home with free conversation. Coupled with this common and neutral ground are two other key factors Ray Oldenburg found mandatory to establish a vibrant and lively *third place*, i.e. regulars (people keep returning to the place) and a playful mood.

Nonetheless, Oldenburg doesn't include Work at the *third place* although it is now absolute evidence that Coworking, as conceived at the beginning of the 21st century, is exactly the merging of those two dimensions – work and the community place, the *third place*. Significantly, Oldenburg's seminal book was written the same year as the advent of the world wide web (1989) before Work got dematerialized after access to the Internet, devices' portability, wifi, hi-speed bandwidth, etc. In short, work has become something we can do whenever and wherever we want, although we won't address here the societal problems this change of paradigm will cause to the way we live in the near future.

In reality, Coworking is much more than just sharing a workplace with others. It is now understood as a global and complex social phenomenon (Waters-Lynch, Potts, Butcher, Dodson, & Hurley, 2016) including work, learning, and other human activities. Furthermore, Coworking spaces are taking over, changing, and challenging the way we work; the way creative workers interact; and how space and place relate to these new ways of working (Brown, 2017).

Heutagogy – From Access to Content to Context

Fred Garnett was a member of London's team at Erasmus+ Project *The Origin of Spaces* (<http://originofspaces.com/>) with the goal of producing an online toolbox *to share existing know-how and explore new practices related to coworking ecosystems*. ('Origin of Spaces - Innovative practices for creative clusters', n.d.). Other teams included the cities of Lisboa (Portugal), Bilbao (Spain), Pula (Croatia, and Bordeaux (France). In Lisboa, the team gathered LX Factory and Coworklisboa (founded in 2010).

Garnett's work deals with Heutagogy (or self-determined learning), and self-determined learning places in a context-based future post web 2.0 pedagogic model (Garnett, n.d.). Heutagogy can be described as self-directed learning as opposed to andragogy which is student-centered learning (Halupa, 2015). The heutagogical model of learning is primarily based on the learner (Hase, S., & Kenyon, C., 2000). This author suggests heutagogy learning models would benefit *a far more creative approach to learning, no matter what the context*.

Underground / Middleground / Upperground

Underground / Middleground / Upperground is a theoretical framework originally proposed in 2010 by Patrick Cohendet (Cohendet, Grandadam, & Simon, 2010). This author suggests an *Anatomy of the City* based in three levels or layers contributing to a creative feed of knowledge between those three levels. This section describes Cohendet's system, exclusively based on his original article.

The *Underground* is the level of the individuals, including the actual creative workers, remote workers, digital nomads, and independent professionals. In contrast, the *Upperground*, on top of these three layers, comprises the level of all the formal institutions, companies, services, etc. Finally, the *Middleground* connects the two previous levels, aiming to identify communities.

At the *Underground* level lives everyone and everything that is not based on formal relationships or organisations. These actors have a strong connection with art and culture, nourishing their identity and lifestyle. In contrast, this level and its players feed up the corporate and formal world of the *Upperground*, establishing new trends in art, urban culture, sports, fashion, gaming, etc. As a result, the *Middleground* is a mediation field, in between the levels above and below, that connects the formal and the informal world. Accordingly, Coworking spaces belong naturally to the *Middleground* as mediating spaces between formal and informal dimensions like Work, Leisure, and Learning.

Coworking Design Learning Conceptual Framework

Based on a merging between the three presented concepts from Cohendet, Garnett, and Oldenburg, we present an exploratory and ongoing conceptual framework towards a Coworking Design Learning model based on a context-based heutagogical approach. The main purpose of such a framework is to map our research work. Our quest is to pursue and make available new knowledge for new Design Learning strategies grounded on how coworking spaces nurture their communities, and how those spaces are in fact learning spaces based on self-determined modes of acquiring knowledge.

These are times of transdisciplinarity where a learner gathers knowledge from all sorts of sources, breaking any formal barrier between work, learning, home, community (Middleton, 2018). In spite of this context, Design at Higher Education is still struggling to keep pace with the profound and diffuse changes brought by these new learners. Andrew Middleton calls these new learners the *nomadic learners*. This author recalls the lack of strategies from the University to address these new learners demands and to propose non-formal spaces to learn.

In 2015, Ezio Manzini proposed a new Design definition which we believe integrates that emerging notion of the necessity of collaboration at all levels in the Design field. Manzini refers to “all the involved actors”. This sentence now includes all areas of knowledge, defining new roles for “the design experts”, probably as catalysts of the mentioned “open-ended co-design processes”:

Design is a culture and a practice concerning how things ought to be in order to attain desired functions and meanings. It takes place within open-ended co-design processes in which all the involved actors participate in different ways. It is based on a human capability that everyone can cultivate and which for some – the design experts – becomes a profession. The role of design experts is to trigger and support these open-ended co-design processes, using their design knowledge

to conceive and enhance clear-cut, focused design initiatives. (Manzini, 2015, p.53)

The proposed framework embodies the foundational three layers from Cohendet adding the conceptual work from Garnett and Ray Oldenburg at the core level of this system – the *Underground*. We aim to describe in detail each layer towards a better understanding of the entire system.

As can be seen in fig. 01, this framework is based on the trilogy *Upperground/Middleground/Underground* originally proposed by Patrick Cohendet. It also includes Garnett and Oldenburg concepts at the *Underground*. Although the *third place*, as presented by Oldenburg, would logically fit into the *Middleground*, we believe it is today a transition between the *Underground* and the *Middleground*, i.e some *third places* never migrate to the *Middleground*, keeping their original self-determined nature, while others embrace the mediation with the formal world above.

At the present time, Design Education is still a matter of the formal world of the *Upperground*. More and more experiences and models are being tested worldwide but, one way or another, the majority of these experiments end up at the formal level of the learning institutions. As a result, what sometimes start at the *Underground*, coming from the individuals' creative class, is then absorbed by the formal institutions without the mediation offered by the *Middleground*. Coworking spaces are *Middleground* by nature; places of mediation between individuals; between work and learning; between formal and informal; self-determined to its core.



Figure 01. Coworking Design Learning Conceptual Framework
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CONCLUSION

Coworking spaces – as a new evidence of merged spaces between work and learning – are in the *Middleground* field proposed by our exploratory framework based on Cohendet's concept while Higher Education Schools in Design still operate in the *Upperground*, disconnected from the new trends coming from the base of this framework, the *Underground*, its actors, and players. Our studies and research points to shifting in Design Learning Spaces from the formal world to a more informal one, better connected to the creative class nowadays nourishing the two levels above. To summarise, we expect to validate this conceptual framework to support our research body of work.

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