

# **Growing Collaborative Creative Learning Spaces: the case of London School of Mosaic**

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## **Abstract**

The chapter builds and bridges together two recent strands of literature on the emergence of collaborative working spaces in the creative economy: on one side it considers the role of shared-work spaces and co-working as platforms for collaboration and on the other it argues also for their role in offering formal and informal learning opportunities. The chapter builds on the communities of practice framework and reflects on the learning opportunities that emerge formally and informally. We use an in-depth case study, the London School of Mosaic, to reflect on how creative collaboration overlaps and flourishes in spaces where both co-working and co-learning take place. London School of Mosaic is a social enterprise that both supports mosaic production and producers but also aims to provide a learning space for new people to engage in this practice. It connects traditional and heritage-based knowledge with new creative enterprises and projects, again offering co-working and collaborations which go beyond the individual practices. The case study allows us to reflect on what role learning spaces can play in the

development of collaborative creative practices which connect the economy and the social in new ways.

## **Introduction**

The chapter highlights the importance of learning within the context of creative collaborative spaces. Firstly, we briefly review the literature on co-working and collaborative spaces (Gandini, Bandinelli, & Cossu, 2017; Merkel, 2018) and address the importance of posing more questions around learning and co-learning. Here we are interested in what kind of dynamics of learning are presented and what value is placed on the potential for learning. Secondly, we explore these issues through the lenses of a case study, London School of Mosaic (LSoM). LSoM is a social enterprise that both supports mosaic production and producers but also aims to provide a learning space for new people to engage in this practice. It presents a hybrid model of co-working and teaching structure but also highlights the importance of informal opportunities for knowledge sharing and learning as an asset for internal stakeholders (artists and co-workers) as well as the wider local community. The case study allows us to reflect on what role social enterprises and learning spaces can play in the development of collaborative creative practices which connect the economy and the social in new ways.

## **Collaborative creative spaces: from co-working to co-learning**

Many chapters in this book have already highlighted the nature of the new ‘collaborative turn’ from the examples of Fablab to old space being reinvented (libraries) and traditional formats like Festivals taking new collaborative agendas (Comunian, 2017b). This of course also connects with new work practices, beyond the traditional 9 to 5 office space (Sundsted, Jones, & Bacigalupo, 2009) but we could argue for some creative practices connecting also with the social and collaborative nature of creativity itself (Wilson, 2010).

While in many case studies and research papers on co-working and collaborative spaces we can find references to the value of ‘learning’ as key component and added value (Spinuzzi, 2012; Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017; Waters-Lynch, Potts, Butcher, Dodson, & Hurley, 2016), there is little research that focus specific on the kind of learning and learning dynamics that are facilitated by collaborative spaces. An example is the work of Bilandzic on public libraries - although his focus is also specifically on the role of technology in connecting and facilitating learning (Bilandzic & Foth, 2016) – borrowing from Ito et al. (2013) he argues that coworking spaces can promote an organic form of ‘connected learning’. Ito et al (2013, p.4) – talking about young people new modes of learning - define “connected learning” as a type of learning that “advocates for broadened access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity”. Similarly, Spinuzzi et al. (2019) argue about the importance of the community dimension behind collaborative spaces but they highlight how even these two keywords ‘community’ and ‘collaboration’ remain mostly underdefined in the literature. This research has connections with other research in management around the importance for learning to take place within connected communities which have shared goals and passions, such as in the case of the concept of ‘communities of practice’

(Wenger, 1998). Wenger describes communities of practice as “learning as a social practice” but highlights also how they only take place around these very practices that are important for that specific community. These practices are generally of cultural character in Wenger’s framework, for example through sharing similar values, an environment or shared histories. In the context of artistic production, practice could also be specific artistic practices which have shared social and symbolic values and repertoires. Many authors highlight the importance of social dynamics behind learning as “social learning” (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Emami, 2012). In Waters-Lynch & Jason Potts (2017) they find via ethnographic research that individuals in coworking spaces highlighted “the value of discovery, social interactions and learning through observation and imitation” much more than any other amenities co-working could offer. Furthermore, in many collaborative spaces we observe evolving relations of individuals which from newcomers practicing forms of legitimate peripheral participation – slowly entering the community and learning – changes their role overtime to provide learning for others (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

Furthermore, the literature on clusters – which we could argue connects with many of the dynamics of what happens within collaborative spaces on a micro-scale – can provide some value here as it placed historically much more relevance on ‘learning’. Within this literature in particular Capello (1999) talks about ‘collective learning processes’: these are learning processes taking place within social contexts or through “institutional routines and behaviors which facilitate the sharing of information and know-how (Capello, 1999, p. 356). In this chapter we argue that within collaborative spaces not only routines and behaviors facilitate learning and sharing but also can stimulate sharing of values towards the community and its spaces. Despite the scarce attention towards the value of learning in co-working and collaborative spaces, more attention recently has been placed on the collaborative turn within usually more formal learning

spaces. Ashton and Comunian (2019) review the presence of creative hubs in higher education settings, suggesting that even formal learning structures like universities are increasingly adopting co-working and hubs models for their students proving that these structures might provide a different kind of learning context (Wong & Partridge, 2016). Similarly, Jacobi (2017) highlights how current changes in the UK higher education setting have pushed towards the establishment of new informal learning opportunities for artists. We can argue that learning in the context of arts and creative disciplines represents a series of challenges which go beyond what formal learning can provide (desk-based teaching) and needs to engage with specific art or design practices in studios or workshops (Buren & Repensek, 1979; McHugh, 2014) but also collaborative and engaged frameworks which are hard for an individual to devise by him/herself. This connects with the role of learning institutions in their regional contexts (Comunian, Gilmore, & Jacobi, 2015) but also with the network and power dynamics which are often exclusive and not accessible by many (Comunian, 2017a) and the type of knowledge that is being shared.

There is an extensive literature on how learning takes place in formal and informal settings, however we are specifically interested in the latter and how informal type of learning happens in outside mainstream education. Since the seminal work of Polanyi (1966) a specific focus has been place on the way learning and knowledge are exchange in tacit ways (Stenmark, 2000; Tsoukas, 2005). This has also be the interest of scholars in the creative and new media sector. For examples, Pratt (2002) articulates how knowledge in these sectors involve “tacit and situated knowledge. Tacit knowledge is usually encompassed by a range of learning by doing, learning by watching, and simply learning by ‘being there’”(Pratt, 2002, p.40). We argue that alternative types of learning and especially situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are central

in collaborative spaces. Therefore, it is important to consider the novelty that the collaborative space context may bring to the learning literature. This connects with the specific role of space and materiality, and the affordances that they bring into the learning processes ((Dale & Burrell, 2007; Mitev & De Vaujany, 2013). Therefore, this chapters consider that issue of how tacit and explicit dimensions of learning play out in collaborative spaces.

The recent literature on maker spaces places much more emphasis on learning. Peppler, Halverson, and Kafai (2016) define the makers movement as network of connected learning communities. They mix a DIY can do attitude with value placed on both collaboration and the potential of new technologies. However, they also highlight the collaborative ethics but question why and how these have become such successful learning environment (which has been included also in schools, universities and other settings) and they consider that “a maker approach to learning is as much do-it-yourself as it is do-it-with others” (p.5). Therefore, drawing from the literature it is possible to identify an evolution in the way co-working spaces have been understood overtime, moving from services offices to co-working to ‘new learning spaces’ (figure 1 in Waters-Lynch et al.2016, p. 421). However, the interaction between learning with co-working needs more investigation and attention. We aim to use these ideas to explore how our case study – London School of Mosaic – can be understood as a collaborative learning space and how learning happens at different levels but always as a collaborative/shared experience based in a physical space.

## **London School of Mosaic**

London School of Mosaic (LSoM) can be considered a hybrid collaborative space. It was set up in 2017 in Gospel Oak, Camden as specialist provider of education in the art form of mosaic, providing short courses, vocational training and higher education. The organization emerged out 14 years of making mosaic as tool for community cohesion in a small studio near Waterloo Station in central London. However, when the school opened in Camden in the basement of a social housing estate near Hampstead Heath, it immediately provided work spaces not only for fellow mosaic makers but predominantly for local artists working in a range of art practices including painting, print making, drawing, ceramics and book binding. The school currently houses 16 resident artists and a collective of ceramicists, all of them working alongside LSoM's students and staff who are actively engaged in running and maintaining a shared studio space and workshop.

Providing affordable studios not just enables artists to have work space in a neighborhood and borough with scarcity of artistic workspace, it also helped LSoM to cover their rent in the set-up phase with social investment finance being drawn down. In April 2019 the school was awarded stage 1 funding with the GLA's Good Growth Fund for the development of further studios (up to 70) in empty garages adjacent to their current space. For this project a team of architects and council representatives were appointed to develop a feasibility study for a vision that foresees the physical and functional improvement of the site, while building a firm understanding of how the space can cater for shared learning between artists, the local community and LSoM.

## **Data and Methods**

LSOM provided an interesting case study to investigating the interaction between learning and co-working. While LSOM was set-up as a place for learning (in the form of formal teaching and workshops around mosaic), its role has been evolving into a provider for artists space. Therefore, we decided to undertake intensive fieldwork within this context to see how co-working and co-learning emerge and in what ways the organization (and its spaces) are responding to wider needs emerging through providing spaces for artists and the local community.

The data collection took place between April and May 2019 via the form of qualitative interviews (3 with resident artists; 1 short course teacher; 1 short course student, 1 manager of LSOM, 1 technician and 1 with the team of architects appointed to work with LSoM) as well as the observations of the school's environment and courses (20 hours in total). The central themes discussed in the interview were: 1) how learning was undertaken or developed within the space, 2) how the space stimulate (or not) individuals' practice, 3) how shared spaces enhanced / influenced (or not) social interactions, and 4) how collaboration was part (or not) of individuals' work and practice. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes on average and were recorded (with permission) and transcribed verbatim. The interview data was analyzed using thematic coding and the process consists of multiple re-iteration going back to texts to reflect on the emerging themes.

### **The role of space: open access and learning**

Mosaic is a practice based on collaboration especially when it is based on large-scale production where tasks, the studio and workshops are shared. This is reflected in the site of the school which consists of a 650 sqm open workshop, with a long corridor space in the center equipped with



tables and chairs from which side studios and material stores lead. These spaces are dedicated for mosaic making and a mosaic-focused education program, but are shared with other groups and activities such as sewing and ceramics workshops to maximize not only the income generated from the space but also the charitable aims of the organization to create social impact through the arts. The openness of the physical space (see fig. 1) has been directed through its layout and the DIY attitude of an environment for artistic production, with expenses kept at a minimum during its initial setting up phase between September and December 2017. But as a member of the team of architects who work with LSoM note: “The open space is not so much a coincidence because if it would not have worked out or not have been useful, then you would have built partitions, but you decided not to!” (architect).



**Fig. 1: London School of Mosaic Open space**

This suggests that the configuration of laying out space in a shared workshop comes from a learning process that is directed by the practices that users engage with in such an environment. While this is relevant for the collective of users, such as LSoM's students and volunteers, this also matters for studio users who license workspace from LSoM.

As the school is in its development phase, the staff decided to license 16 spaces for shared artist studios, again to cross-finance the rent during the organizations' development phase. These were very quickly filled by people engaging in various practices, not restricted to mosaic. Some of these spaces are separated from the main open studio in which mosaic making activities

and teaching takes place, providing 8 shared spaces in an open plan configuration and an additional two lockable studios, one which is shared among two artists and one housing a book binding workshop. As these studios were moved into, the artists and makers had to invest substantial time and some of their own resources in painting the walls to make the space brighter, considering the site was a former garage with dark-grey concrete floors and walls. They moved in recycled furniture either found in a skip nearby or borrowed from the school, which receives furniture donations from the British Library. For some of the users of the space this was the first time they had set up an artist studio, as they have only recently started to develop an artistic practice and had to become familiar with environments for artistic production. This meant new skills had to be learned in terms of organizing a space for artistic production, learning about the kind of environment their practice needs to flourish, i.e. prompting questions like: Is there a specific structure or way of organization needed for me to use the space? Or do I require more unstructured or chaotic environment to be creative?

On another level they learn through sharing space with other artists about their identity as artists or makers, and if they prefer to work in isolation or if they can work with others. For some this is a matter of practice while for others this is linked to personality and character, or a combination of both.

“I move my things around as required with the size of works I make. For me it is important that I can concentrate in my own space, but at the same time I have access to the social environment of the school in the open workshop area. I often talk to members of staff who are always open, which helps me to refresh my mind to then get back to my work with more ideas.” (resident artist/painter).

“The studio is well organized with designated and labelled places for tools and materials, which is important so I know where to look for them and where to put them back. I know the importance of having a self-organized system in place as I work as an artist assistant in a big industrial workshop.” (short course student)

These statements highlight how there are the formally set up workspaces for mosaic students and teachers juxtaposed with the more informal spaces that resident artists shape through the requirements of their own practices. While these formal workshop spaces are accessible to the resident artists, their studios are more reclusive yet accessible through the social and symbolic dynamic that comes with being part of the overall space. An important element here is around the flexibility for artists to shape their space and what kind of learning happens when people are given this choice rather than being moved into a space already designed and finished.

### **Co-working as co-learning**

Not only does access to other studios stimulate the way of working of other users, but very importantly it allows for absorbing aesthetics into one’s own way of seeing: “Work changes through seeing other peoples’ work develop, not directly but through the process of making” (resident artist/painter). This can be contextualized as symbolic form of learning only possible within shared workspaces, as access to and visibility of other studios is open. Important here is that direct collaboration is not prescribed but might be a result of having conversations with others about the work.

On a very practical and technical level, users of the space learned how to use DIY tools and evaluate health and safety within an artisan workshop. Members have access to a wood

workshop, a tool store as well as the mosaic making facilities and the schools' computers if required. Access to the facilities is negotiated between individuals who carry specific knowledge, i.e. the core staff team at the school will direct users towards specific resources or will give organizational support whereas other users of the space (paying members or volunteers) have specific knowledge such as in wood work which they can share with users on a trust and favor based system, rather than this being monetary transaction or formal teaching arrangement. In this sense the learning in the space is negotiated through individuals who carry specific knowledge that is released through asking for help. Through using materials and tools social interaction emerges, which again creates opportunities for interaction with others and their ideas, fostering innovation, collaboration and ideas.

“I work for the school on a voluntary basis, helping the studio build storage units or cut wood bases for mosaic courses, in exchange for having space and resources for my carpentry business. People come to me often with very few ideas about what tools they might need to make a frame, for example. I then chat to them about their project and guide them towards the tools and materials they need and the ways in which they need to set up their project. I observe often how during the process of working with wood the students or resident artists are verifying with their peers that what they are doing is correct. Often, those that I instruct then tell others how to make a frame. They pass on the knowledge.” (carpenter and technician)

In this quote we can read how the environment of LSoM facilitates legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) allowing for individuals to move from learning to teachers and back to learners in a range of flexible environments and participation opportunities.

Interestingly, although the organization has various modes of formal teaching and learning as part of their diverse courses ranging from vocation to higher education, the learning environment is shared between users of the space enrolled on course and those licensing a studio not enrolled on any formal teaching. Studio users therefore may not have access to the specific knowledge mediated within formalized teaching to which they don't have direct access, however because the space is open they can ask students any questions or observe their progress. This has also been highly beneficial for the schools' short course students who use the space only once a week and can see progress from other people working on bigger projects and more complex methods around them.

“My short course students benefit from the openness of the space. It allows me to show them work in progress from the diploma, which is a level of practice they would otherwise have no access to. This way they learn about different techniques and approaches for large-scale and professional mosaic.” (short course teacher)

### **Learning and shared values**

Despite the LSoM focusing on mosaic, members of the shared workspace felt the environment was open and tolerant towards a variety of people, practices and philosophies of making, seeking learning from exchange not only within specialist knowledge in mosaic but through crossover between practices and disciplines. This can be seen as a model of ‘connected learning’ which engages individuals on a range of level and therefore instigate shared values and actions. The school has students and volunteers with special needs and some sessions with children, which is an opportunity many of the artists have used to learn new skills in communicating with

potentially marginalized members of the community. They felt that in other shared workspaces they would not be exposed to such a level of diversity, which “makes me a more tolerant person, teaches me how to exercise patience and how to approach diverse audiences about my work or generally about life” (ceramicist).

What these examples of social interaction show, is how the space generates not only an experience of collaborative practice in a shared learning environment primarily for mosaic makers, but an ethos of ‘tolerance, openness and respect’ which is born out of and mediated through the social ethos of the organization. Along these lines one of the students who used to have a studio with the school, expressed that she feels more in common with people of different backgrounds at the school than with people from her corporate background. Another member underlined this by detailing the schools’ openness through comparison with other mosaic schools, for example those in Italy which are more focused on retaining knowledge within an exclusive group of makers in order to retain competitive advantage on a niche market. The LSoM requires openness to increase opportunities for the mosaic sector and for the local community, and therefore has an outreach ethos in order to create a much broader movement around mosaic and social impact.

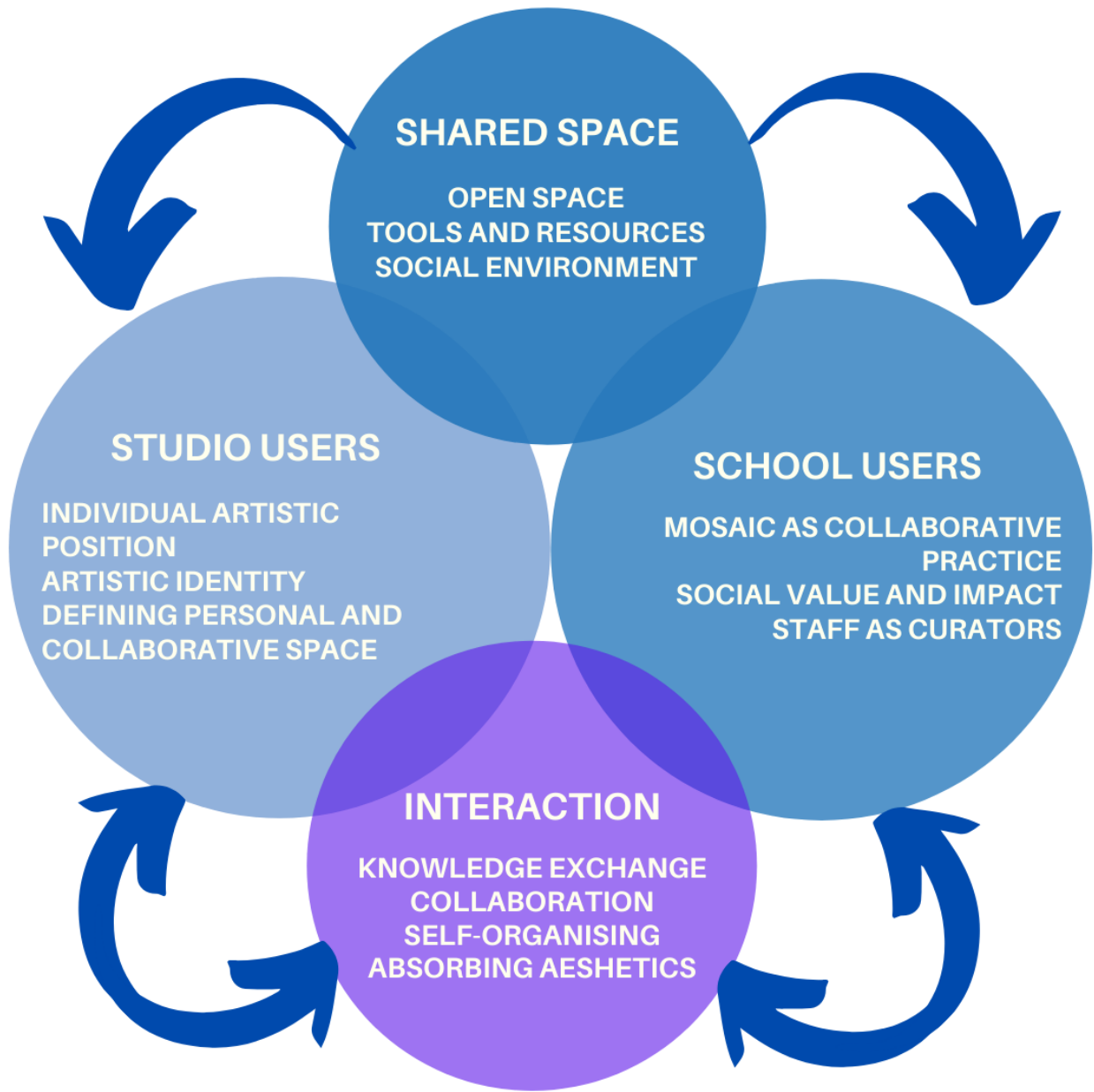
Despite the mosaic process being highly collaborative within a collective of artisans, it is not strictly through this practice that the organizations’ social ethos is mediated. A number of respondents highlighted the role of organizational staff as curators for the space, who have the power to define what this ethos is yet this does not mean it is a top-down decision. The respondents felt the space was not any more hierarchical because this, and that change within the shared learning space was only possible if these shared core principles were clear, fair and open to criticism. This process of negotiation creates an environment for learning not only for users of

the space but also for those organizing it. This horizontal level of learning is achieved through the ethos of being open and listening to suggestions and actioning upon these within the frame of core principles gives.

While some of the respondents referred to the LSoM's model of shared workspace as Makerspace or Hackspace, others thought it was a Community space because of the openness towards the space's educational activities being attended by a diversity of people. This is something that all respondents noted as unique and valued. Membership or the status as a user, again, is not only negotiated through a monetary transaction, but through skills offered in exchange of space. This negotiation is something new for people not coming from an arts or potentially activist background and is part of the learning process, where much of learning is mediated through social and symbolic interaction (Wenger, 1998). The respondents clearly identified more with a shared workspace that is for makers, than with a space that caters for digital production "in which images of art are reproduced but not art made" (short course teacher). There are for example spaces with a more design-led corporate appeal featuring hot-desking and entertainment space, which cater more broadly to the creative industries and/or the digital sector. Some of the respondents felt interaction in this kind of spaces is on the basis of business with clear set of goals and commercial ambitions, whereas Makerspaces allow for a free flow of ideas, social and material interaction around which social and subject-specific learning evolves.

As fig.2 summarizes the shared space and tool provide a platform for the interaction between school users and studio users. This shared interaction offers the opportunity and affordances to create forms of collaborations, learning and value/aesthetic sharing which bring create a cohesive community within the space.

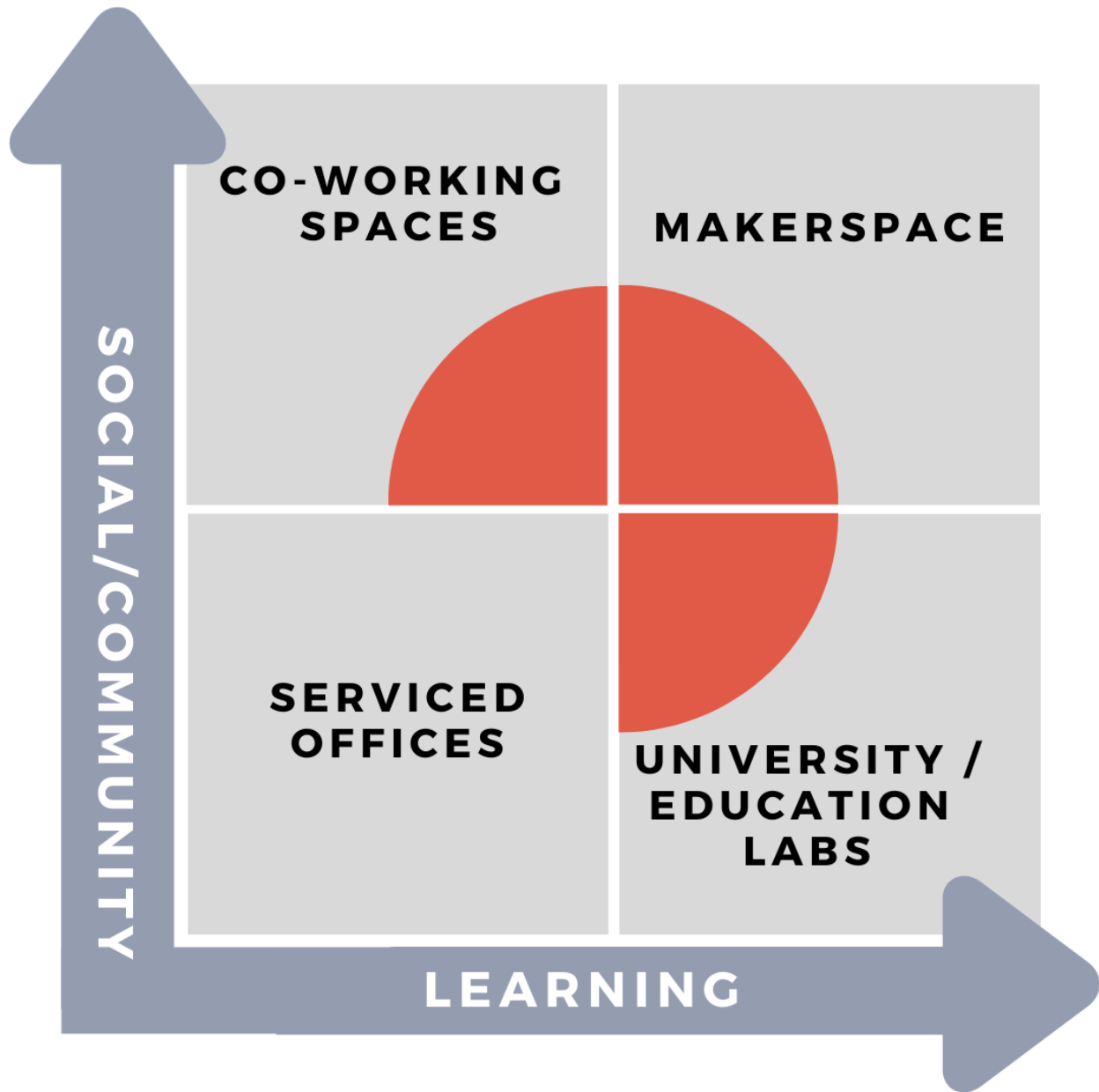




**Fig. 2: Interaction between studio users and school users at LSOM**

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The case study of LSoM provides a useful platform to reflect on the dynamics of learning within collaborative spaces but also the different modes and levels of learning that can be identified in collaborative settings. In particular, we highlighted here that LSoM can be conceived as a hybrid space providing both studio/co-working facilities as well as hosting formal learning opportunities (mosaic teaching). Using fig.3 we could argue that the first function prioritizes the creation of a social/community environment, while the second prioritizes learning. However, the open space nature of LSoM and the values of the organization means that rather than these two distinct functions remaining separate, they merge and interconnect generating a model closer to the 'makerspace' model, where high levels of learning and interaction co-exist and interconnect with a highly connected community.



**Fig. 3 Learning and collaborative spaces**

In the chapter we highlighted a range of nested and interconnected opportunities for learning: from learning specific skills, to learning by relating with others, to learning through access to individuals and their values and approaches, to identifying with modes of artistic production.

These are very much individual trajectories which are facilitated by a social context which outside

of LSoM would not have emerged. However, we argue that this can be seen as a model of ‘connected learning’, not only because it engages individuals on a range of levels and therefore instigates shared values and actions but because the learning is not only experienced by the individuals involved but shaped by them and their action, both everyday practical actions as well as actions of political engagement or activism. This also underlines how the LSoM’s model is more of an ecosystem that needs case-by case decision making by those identified as ‘curators’ of the space, rather than a generalization of how it should function. The architects however felt that for this ecosystem to work it should have a maximum size, and that if the school grew their provision of spaces that this should be separated and its ethos managed by new curators, i.e. a studio manager and various volunteers who will run the new space. Changes of structure might change patterns of learning and would need to be carefully considered and researched.

LSoM represent a case study of hybrid space that offers learning opportunities and co-working. While the practices emerging in LSoM cannot be generalized or replicated in other spaces, we believe the issues of learning and collaboration are intrinsically very relevant. We propose that bridging learning and collaboration using a situated learning approach can be a useful lens to analyze any collaborative space, even spaces that focus just on co-working. While LSoM can provide an interesting input in this discussion, we recognize more research is needed and specifically around these dichotomies:

- 1) The negotiation between hierarchy and self-organization in collaborative spaces, which brings to attention evolution of such spaces between planned and organic development;
- 2) The importance of materiality versus technology – shared tools as well as space to create connection and opportunities for learning;

- 3) Material and aesthetic implications of space are important, for example how the design of workspace can foster collaboration or cater flexibly for the physical and mental needs of artists.

Finally, we highlighted in the paper how a benefit of having an open community-based shared learning space, is that users are exposed to members of the locale and therefore engage in conversations about place. One of the users highlighted how there could be much more emphasis for studio users to explore the neighborhood, in particular because the school is so close to Hampstead Heath, as a source of inspiration and using the park for their wellbeing. In this respect, we argue that the impact of the connected learning of LSoM also reaches beyond its spaces and have wider regeneration potential also for its context. As Glaeser (1999) discusses in relation to city “as impressive as the role of cities in generating new innovations may be, the primary informational role of cities may not be in creating cutting edge technologies, but rather in creating learning opportunities for everyday people. Dense urban agglomerations provide a faster rate of contact between individuals and each new contact provide an opportunity”. This captures the ethos of LSoM but also the wider potential for learning that collaborative spaces can have in our cities. We hope that future research can consider this impact within the broader community.

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