Priestley College: How do you successfully develop your new learning space? ...ask your students, of course!

Summary

When Priestley College began to plan the redevelopment of its learning resource centre, it continued the culture of student involvement that exists within the College by asking students to help plan and create the new development. This case study describes how the Jisc infoKit on 'Planning and Designing Technology-Rich Learning Spaces' was used as the starting point for ideas and planning, and how the finished development was the recognisable result of students’ ideas and plans.

About Priestley College

Priestley College, Warrington, is a Sixth Form college providing a range of courses covering nine curriculum areas. The vast majority of the students take Level 3 programmes at either AS and A-level or at BTEC National. The College has recently invested around £9m on its campus development.

The most recent Ofsted inspection graded the College as outstanding; it has also been awarded Beacon Status.

Genuine prominence is given to the learner voice through an Elected Student Council, focus groups with the Principal, and work with the Governing Body.

The challenge

As part of wider college developments at Priestley College, a decision was taken to redevelop the learning resource centre (LRC). Student and staff feedback over time had highlighted a range of issues within the existing LRC; Principal Mike Southworth recognised that overall the LRC was no longer meeting the teaching and learning needs of the students and staff.

Mark Jenkins, Learning Resources Manager at Priestley College was tasked with chairing the group which would drive forward the LRC redevelopment. Mark was keen to retain some aspects of the existing LRC, such as individual study spaces, and a teaching space, but there were issues with the current space which included:
• high book shelving which dominated the LRC;

• poor teaching space which was part of an open-access PC area, resulting in staff trying to teach alongside other students using the open-access area; conversely, individual students using the open-access area were disrupted by the teaching sessions taking place; and

• a lack of distinction between individual areas and group study areas.

The activity

The planning group which Mark was to chair included the Principal, Vice Principal, Estates Manager, Resources Director, and LRC staff. In line with an established culture of student involvement in college developments, there was an invitation for three students from the Elected Student Council to join the planning group. The three students selected were:

• Anthony Lawton - LRC representative;

• Ruth Davidson - Equal Opportunities representative; and

• Yvonne Dobson - College Secretary.

Having seen a printed copy of the Jisc publication 'Designing Spaces for Effective Learning', Mark contacted the Jisc Regional Support Centre for the Northwest for guidance. FE e-Learning Adviser Kevin Hickey directed Mark to the online Jisc infoKit on 'Planning and Designing Technology-Rich Learning Spaces', and in particular to the photographic database of learning spaces on Flickr.

Mark used images from the infoKit as inspiration for the planning group at their first meeting; the key elements of his presentation featured:

• zoning/dividing spaces;

• regulating spaces for different uses;

• storage within spaces;

• informal seating; and

• express areas.

He did not restrict what he showed the group in order to encourage creative thinking, and included high quality, innovative projects such as the Saltire Centre at Glasgow Caledonian University, even though he knew the College could not match the same scale of innovation in their development.
Following Mark’s presentation, the group discussed requirements and importantly, what wasn’t working in the current LRC. The students’ understanding of the development requirements and their enthusiasm for the project were so apparent during the meeting that the group asked them to work up ideas for LRC, to bring back to the following meeting six weeks later.

Mark had imagined that, following discussion and comments from the group at the first meeting, he would plan the development, involving the students in bringing the ideas to fruition. However, having listened to their positive input to the first meeting, he and the rest of the group didn’t have any concerns about letting the students lead the planning, especially the degree to which they understood the existing issues with the LRC. They were also well-briefed at the meeting and could refer to the minutes for clarification; also, they were supplied with the presentation and link to the Jisc infoNet Flickr site link for inspiration.

It was arranged for the second meeting to take place in the LRC so that the students could take the group on a walk through to describe their plans. Although these plans were simple pencil drawings on paper, the group were impressed with how well the students had interpreted the brief; so much so, that not only did they feel they did not need to make any changes, but the Principal was happy to sanction a significant budget increase to ensure that the plans could become a reality.

The students’ original sketched plans were translated into CAD plans in-house at the College so that the group could see them to scale. Whilst it became apparent that the students had underestimated space at times, for example in calculating the number of PCs that could be comfortably located, it did not constrain the development as they had envisaged it.

The contractor appointed to the development produced a final set of plans to work from. In a similar vein to the ethos of student involvement, the Head of Art & Design at the College created the colour palette for the development.
Students’ sketched plan for the ground floor of the LRC

CAD plan of the ground floor of the LRC produced in-house
The outcomes

The finished LRC development has provided the College with a comprehensive range of learning spaces, comprising:

- open access areas with desktop PCs;
- a screened teaching space with desktop PCs;
- group learning spaces with round tables;
- express PC areas for checking email;
- screened individual study spaces;
- informal ‘comfy’ seating areas;
- low shelving for book stock, maximising the use of light and space; and
- wireless access throughout the building (with laptop loans available).
The teaching space, which is screened from open access PCs by low level book shelving, can be booked a week in advance by teachers for specific teaching sessions. Previously, PCs in the open-access area were booked for these teaching sessions, with the obvious disadvantages that come from the lack of distinction between a formal class and other students using the area.

Staff have expressed to Mark how much better the new teaching space is, saying they can now feel confident when they teach in there, and are better able to keep the class focused.

Mark is also pleased that far fewer noise issues have been raised in the redeveloped LRC, despite the inclusion of the teaching space and individual study areas; he puts this down to the 'zoning' they have introduced where, for example, 'legitimate' noise in the group spaces is confined to that zone and, therefore, creating less of an issue than when the LRC was intended to be a quiet zone throughout.
The impact

With hindsight, Mark reflects that the College would not want to have done anything differently in relation to the development, and since opening at the start of the last academic year feedback has been very positive.

He acknowledges that the needs of the LRC will continue to change and develop over time, but is confident that they have, to some degree, already taken future needs into consideration by ensuring that very little in the new development is fixed; the majority of equipment, furniture and fittings could be moved around if needed.

Mark's advice to others undertaking similar developments would definitely be to involve learners, and to use learners and staff, as users, to highlight the positives and negatives of existing spaces in order to inform new ones.

Mark would advocate use of the Jisc infoKit too, especially the rich photographic database of learning spaces, encouraging others to “look at what's out there”, but see them in terms of ‘What would work for us?’

The involvement of students through the Council is consistent with the Priestley College ‘ethos’; and it is a genuine involvement that was recognised and highlighted by Ofsted at the last inspection, stating that the “strong focus on the learner voice” was a key strength, and that “learner feedback is used extremely well to make improvements”.

LRC interior

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Mark speculates that this development might have set a new precedent for student involvement in projects at the College, not just in relation to the success of the finished LRC, but also in relation to students' development; it gave them, he says, “a lot of confidence to know that they weren't just being asked to ‘rubber stamp' a development that had already been planned”.

As you might imagine for such a learner-focused College the three students, who had moved on to University, were not only invited back to celebrate the launch of the new LRC development, they were asked to cut the ribbon to officially open it!

**Useful links**

- Jisc RSC Northwest
- Priestley College
- Jisc infoKit on ‘Learning Spaces’

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