Spaces for learners and learning: Evaluating impact

SOLSTICE flexible learning space

St. Martin’s College, Carlisle. 7 September 2006
Focus of session

• Requirements and development of SOLSTICE flexible learning space
• Process of evaluation and initial outcomes
• Considerations

“By assigning individual places it made possible the supervision of each individual and the simultaneous work of all…It made the educational space function like a learning machine…”

Foucault (1977)
• One of 74 HEFCE funded CETLs
• Focus on supported online and blended learning

• Enhancement of learning experience and environment for students, inc. development of:
  • Social learning space in Learning Resource Centre (LRC)
  • Flexible learning space

• Evaluation and research (process as well as output)
Learning space requirements

Brief - development of a ‘flexible’ space for:
- Teaching and learning (classroom environment)
- Staff development
- Meetings/ discussion

Solution determined by:
- Understanding of what we already had (and wanted to change!)
- Literature
- Other institutions (seeing is believing)
- Understanding of what we wanted to provide and achieve
Existing spaces - examples
SOLSTICE learning space
Module chosen for evaluation – Foundation Degree module running over 10 weeks

Ethnographic approach – focus on student and tutor experiences (reflections, narratives)

• Observation of session
• Student focus group interview…followed by further paper-based questions
• Tutor reflections

NB. Tutor well-liked and extremely capable!
Environmental factors important to learners:

• Early recollections – hard seats, echoing rooms
• Experiences of previous sessions in ‘poor’ rooms (comparisons with SOLSTICE space)
• Students highlighted – noise and movement; sighting of equipment/technology; seating and space; temperature; space to work

“Physical environments influence how we feel, hear, and see. Those factors, in turn, influence cognitive and affective performance.”

Jensen (2005)
Theme 2 – Integrating technology

- Observed that use of technology more integrated as laptops enabled appropriate use, and flexibility of how students used them.
- Tutor felt that it was easier to model specific use of technologies – at point of need, students working together, tutor sitting with students.
- Learning support activities successful – e.g. searching and retrieving information/resources.
- Some login issues.
- Use of whiteboards.

NB – Students feeling IT’d out – previous ICT session.
No-one could conclusively say that space made difference to learning, but…

- Conducive to group work and sharing…although “…the integration of group activities with traditional learning tasks has been found to have a significant positive effect on learning” Jensen (2005)

- Space ‘more democratic’, with tutor “less likely to assume role of expert” – although IWB tutor control

- Tutor became “more aware of learners’ experience of the space as a factor in the learning experience”

- Students felt comfortable – group tables major factor – comfort = safety = risk-taking?
Considerations

…for developing flexible learning spaces?
• Don’t ignore environmental factors
• Flexibility is key
• Technology important (but does not necessarily have to be dominant or extensive)

…for evaluating flexible learning spaces?
• Effectiveness of ethnography for evaluating students’ experiences and impact on learning

Jensen, E. (2005) *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
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