



LIBRARY + INFORMATION

update

January/February 2007 Vol 6 (1-2)

THE STUDY CENTRE APPROACH

breaking the mould in Worcs

LARGE PRINT BOOKS

what the readers think

FIFTEEN HUNDRED YEARS

of libraries

GETTING PEOPLE TO JOIN

why is it hard?

BREAKING BARRIERS

to safeguard sound in the British Library archive

I am Cataloguer,

hear me roar!



Breaking the the study centre approach



Students working in the General Education Study Centre.

At an FE college in Worcester, the traditional library has been replaced by study centres with a significant increase in staff, in a move to focus on the learner, report **Kate Gardner** and colleagues. How did this radical change go down with the students, the staff and the teachers?

In 2002 Worcester College of Technology looked successful. It was financially sound and enjoying satisfactory recruitment, and, in the previous year, an inspection by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC)¹ judged the audited curriculum areas and five areas of cross-college provision either 'good' or 'satisfactory'.

The executive and the governing body were, however, concerned that retention and achievement were falling short of the highest standard in some curriculum areas. These concerns had been raised both by local quality-reporting mechanisms and by the FEFC report, which also criticised the library as being too small and in need of refurbishment.

Worcester is a general further education college with approximately 12,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) FE students and 2,500 FTE non-FE students (including nearly 1,000 FTE 14-16 year-olds and approximately 600 FTE higher education students). The campus consists of predominately 1960s buildings, with little room for expansion. Most of the buildings are clustered in the city centre but some are more than one mile from this central cluster.

As part of a package of measures designed to tackle poor retention and achievement, it was decided to look at replacing the existing conventional library and drop-in PC provision with a number of distributed, curriculum-based study centres, each containing ILT equipment, teaching and learning space, learning resources, and access to both academic and learning support staff.

This decision was championed by a new college Principal, who believed this approach could change the existing culture of the college from one based on teaching to one based on learning. The approach had been seen as successful at Somerset College of Arts & Technology (SCAT)² and South East Essex College (SEEC).³ We were also reassured by the college's experience of operating a language centre consisting of language laboratories, books, computers and a seminar room.

Fact-finding

Initial fact-finding focused on the two colleges which had successfully introduced this type of facility. The Principal of SEEC visited Worcester and talked to governors and staff about their experience. This visit also raised the awareness of both governors and staff.

Our research had confirmed the success reported by SCAT and a visit was arranged in June 2003 for some members of the executive and the college librarian. The party visited four large integrated learning centres, each staffed by a mixed multi-functional team of support and academic staff. What impressed the visiting team was the extent to which students were working purposefully, how the mixed teams of staff in each centre were working well together and a feeling that real learning was taking place.

The fact-finding process reinforced our belief that the introduction of study centres could improve the overall success rates of students, and provide an effective learning environment that would meet a wide range of learning styles and support innovatory

mould

learning and teaching strategies.

Most of our buildings consisted of a collection of small-sized rooms unsuitable as study centres and it was clear that some construction work would be needed. An architectural feasibility study, funded by the Learning & Skills Council, was carried out by a national firm of architects to see if and how the buildings could be adapted.

The decision to go ahead with the study centres was taken by the college corporation in autumn 2003. The reaction from staff was not entirely positive. Some teaching staff felt uncomfortable at the thought of teaching in large open spaces, saw the proposed change as a plot to cut guided learning hours and feared that library staff would take over their role. Some library staff clearly had not yet been won over and could not visualise successful academic endeavour without a library. A visit to SCAT by teaching, library and support staff was arranged in spring 2004 and this led to a much more positive attitude towards the planned development.

Pedagogic drivers

It is widely understood that students learn best when constructing their own knowledge and understanding,⁴ in a social environment.⁵ We also believe that the understanding of a concept and the level of understanding develop faster when learners have to explain something to other people. Study centres enable students to support and learn from each other, while presenting them with formal and informal situations in which they interact with concepts and knowledge, and articulate their understanding. Since individuals learn in different ways, even those studying for the same qualification need access to knowledge at different rates and at times appropriate to their existing stage of progress. Current levels of technology can provide learners with wide flexibility in accessing knowledge. The study centres allow students to become autonomous learners.

Study centres present a different environment, in which students attend formal teaching, study on their own or access one-to-one sessions for additional support. We believe students in many colleges are only vaguely aware of the work that staff and other students undertake to support what are often large organisations and workplaces. In study centres, they can see staff and other students carrying out their work or studies. They can interact with other students of different abilities, or at different stages in their education or lives. This open style reinforces the concept that learning needs to be planned, people need to work together, work needs to be organised and documented and that managers need to supervise and observe. It helps students to understand their own responsibilities for managing and planning their own learning and for conforming to social norms, codes

of conduct and ways of working.

It is important to stress that this approach to learning is not seen as 'cost-cutting'. It is not about reducing the guided learning hours for programmes of study nor is it about reducing the impact of teachers facilitating learning. It is dependent upon the collaboration of teachers and study centre staff to provide the best possible learning activities to encourage students in successful academic achievement.

Phased implementation necessary

In September 2003, WCT received approval from the Learning & Skills Council to begin a £6m refurbishment plan, which included the development of eight curriculum-specific study centres. A body of respected advice existed, e.g. from UFI,⁶ which encouraged us to aim for an immediate full implementation. However, it was decided to adopt a phased implementation because we needed to provide a service for students during refurbishment and we also did not have enough staff or financial resources to go for full implementation. Early use of the centres was compromised by the need to provide open access for students from other curriculum areas during the refurbishment period.

The first new study centre opened in Easter 2004 in a newly acquired former police station. More specifically, the centre – for the use of Law students – was created in what was the old court room. The development benefited from Centre of Vocational Excellence funding and was the only centre designed and fitted out by a firm of library suppliers. Not surprisingly this centre, complete with wireless laptops and purpose-built furniture, has become the college's showpiece centre.

Valuable lessons were learnt from this centre, reinforcing the need to have a flexible design, for both short-term effectiveness and future proofing. Ten further study centres have now opened. Notable features of these are the shell from an ex-BAC111 airplane in the Travel & Tourism Study Centre (in which to deliver cabin crew training) and the dance floor and music practice rooms equipped with keyboards, drum kits and guitars in the Music Technology & Performing Arts Centre.

Limits of using existing buildings

Adapting existing buildings to accommodate distributed study centres presented different challenges to building new. Existing infrastructure inhibited the inspirational and motivational design you see, for instance, in new-build learning spaces illustrated in Jisc's *Designing Spaces for Effective Learning*, and also placed constraints on the size and layout of study centres. This resulted in their design not always being ideal. Motivational features such as airplane shells and musical equipment compensate to some extent.

Characteristics of study centres

- Group and team activities where learners can easily interact with each other but focus on their own group and activities.
- High levels of access to ILT.
- Use of written materials and worksheets for learners for the efficient presentation of concepts, thinking and knowledge, instead of whiteboards and/or methods that rely on copying or simple transmission.
- Environments that replicate typical workplaces – managers, teachers, learning support staff, 14-18 and 19+ year-old students carrying out their work together. This reinforces productive attitudes to work, lifelong learning and social inclusion and the concept that achievement of any goal results from social collaboration on many levels.
- Higher attention spans and levels of good behaviour by students, and productive staff-student relationships.
- Reflective and innovative teachers who have developed new skills, supported and monitored by their peers and managers.
- Activities where teachers are constantly involved rather than passively supervising their students' work.

