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'We always come here': investigating the social in social learning.

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We never educate directly but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference. (Dewey, 1916)

Abstract

This article investigates student choices around the 'Third Space' for learning; that which is not either a teaching space or a private space. In mapping the use of such spaces around the University of Northampton's campuses and through the use of semi-structured interviews with students as they use the spaces, it constructs a model to help understand why students choose a particular space to work in and influence decisions in the deliberate creation of such spaces in future.

Four, often overlapping, influences on student choice of space; resources, environment, social and emotional, were identified. That resource rich spaces that allow social interaction and learning to take place in attractive environments are popular should not be surprising but it is the emotional response to space that is of particular interest. Space attachment theory has usually centred on home or places with religious or national symbolism. This research identifies an element of emotional resonance to areas of the university campus, especially the library, which will warrant further research.

Keywords: learning environments; social learning; learning spaces.

Introduction

Although social learning as identified by Vygotsky (1962), Bruner (2006) and others has long been part of formal education experience, recent changes to teaching, learning and assessment practice has led to a reappraisal of *designed* informal student learning environments, taking them beyond group study rooms or syndicate areas. Significant changes to libraries, IT Centres and other shared student spaces have taken place in universities over the past decade. Recent work by, amongst others, Educause in the US (see Oblinger 2006) and ethnographical studies of students (Foster & Gibbons, 2007, Bryant, 2007) have argued for still further development of technology rich and completely flexible spaces. Oblinger (2006) identifies a number of US examples and in the UK Warwick University's Learning Grid, Glasgow Caledonian University's Saltire Centre and others have led the sector through a radical re-thinking of their campus spaces. Driven by increasing student numbers making existing teaching spaces cramped and out-dated, by a growth in collaborative learning, by an increased use of technology (institutional and personal) and a growing recognition of the student as customer and the desire to attract and satisfy them, many universities have refurbished or rebuilt parts of their campuses. The physical

and organisational landscape in higher education has changed radically, evidenced by a proliferation of library cafes, noisy group work areas in previously silent libraries, break-out spaces created in teaching blocks, campus-wide wireless access and the integration of library, IT and student support functions into Learning Commons.

The study sought to investigate the 'Third Space' (Oldenburg, 1989); places that are not teaching spaces (the classrooms or studios) or private spaces (bedrooms/homes) but are spaces on campus used for social learning. Students might be working in groups created for a particular piece of assessment, in self generated groups of friends or working individually. The only criterion was that they were on campus in a public space but not in a teaching session.

The University of Northampton is a 'new' university in the English Midlands with around 11,500 students and two campuses in the town. Although the estate has developed steadily over 20 years in response to growing student numbers and the push towards full university status (achieved in 2005) there were no campus spaces designated specifically as social learning spaces outside of one floor in the main library. This case study was developed to explore the student voice around learning spaces; to examine how students use spaces and how they would like them to develop to both inform developments at Northampton and to understand transferable issues for the HE sector.

The fundamental questions were why students choose to work in particular learning environments on campus and what type of open learning environments and facilities were wanted from the university. We wanted to gain this understanding through asking students rather than assuming behaviours. Although there has been some some work on the student experience of teaching rooms, for example Lowyck et al (2005) or Shelton Mayes and Stoncel (2008), the student voice has usually been missing from wider campus development. It is important to understand the needs and desires of the users of our spaces before embarking on significant change to the learning environment.

Methodology

The project was designed in two stages;

1) a mapping exercise noting student occupancy of open learning spaces across both of Northampton's campuses. These consist of the larger Park campus on the edge of the town and housing the Schools of Business, Education, Health, Social Sciences, and Avenue campus, closer to the town centre and containing the Schools of the Arts and Science and Technology. Open learning environments were defined as any open access student areas that are not being used as a teaching room.

Mapping took place across two weeks in January 2009 and involved the project team surveying all the open access buildings at the same time each morning (11.00-12.00), afternoon (3.00-4.00) and evening (7.00-7.30) noting where students were working. Mapping also took place in the libraries and IT Centres on Saturday and Sundays at 3.00.

Student occupation of an area was noted on a simple head count for each area. Areas were pre-defined based on distinct public spaces. These could be large but discrete, for example the whole of the student restaurant which offers a similar environment throughout or parts of a building, for example the silent study area of the library.

Gender was noted and age, subject and whether they were international or home students. This data was estimated based on close observation, such as which books or web sites were they using or language spoken. In some cases students were approached for confirmation but this element was intended to provide rough trends for internal Northampton use only and not rigorously pressed.

2) 50 semi-structured interviews of individuals and groups using the open learning spaces identified in the mapping exercise were then conducted, totalling 76 students, Interviewees matched the university's gender and age profiles 65% female, 35% male and 23% mature (over 25).

Students were asked why they were working in a particular area and whether they worked elsewhere on campus. They were asked what they liked and disliked about the areas they regularly worked in and what would be their ideal learning environment ("*If you could design an ideal space on campus to work in what would it look like and what facilities would it have?*").

Results

Mapping

The Library and IT Centres dominate as learning spaces – especially at the smaller Avenue campus. The student restaurant at Park campus had some use for learning and negligible numbers of students could be found working in other School buildings including corridors or empty classrooms across the campus. There was no particular difference noted between the choices of 18-25 or older students and there were few significant differences in choices between men and women, although women slightly predominated in Avenue library as did men in the Avenue computer rooms. Park Library and IT Centre had a disproportionately high number of International students in them at any given time but especially in the evenings and at weekends. Business students dominated most of the areas but there were few areas that obviously 'belonged' to one subject with the exception of the specialised School computer rooms. The latter was perhaps a little surprising and may have implications for the development of School specific study areas in campus development at Northampton.

Typically students seem to use two or three areas regularly and rarely consider looking for new areas. This is perhaps to be expected as students find spaces that suit their needs. However, the chosen spaces do cluster in particular buildings leaving others that might be used, for example the Student Union, unused as study spaces despite them being no more or less suitable than, for example, the restaurant.

Interviews

The mapping exercise was followed up with semi-structured interviews of individuals and groups across the two campuses. Content was analysed using categorisation. Words and phrases in the transcripts were coded, grouped into themes and then assigned to broader categories that emerged by linking the themes eg. 'window' or 'daylight' were coded to the theme of 'lighting'. Lighting was then placed in the key category of Environment. The categories of resources, social and environmental were anticipated before the interviews but it became apparent during the coding that a further category of emotional attachment was emerging through phrases such as 'we always sit in the same place'.

There were four clear rationales for choosing an area;

1) Resources/Convenience

The most popular group of preferences fall into this category. This typically applies to the Libraries or IT Centres and themes included the availability of books, journals or computers. Coded phrases in these themes included "the books are right over there", "I can just nip upstairs for the books", "I just need to look at the journals", "This was the first computer that I found free".

It can also apply to more specific needs. Included in the broad theme of computers were software and printers. Food and drink was a theme, as was power (specifically the availability of sockets). There were some who commented on their proximity to other needs eg "I'm waiting for a bus in a little while" or "I'm waiting for a lecture and this is the closest computer"

It was perhaps interesting that only one interviewee used anywhere because it was close to academic staff and none mentioned proximity to IT/Library/Student Support staff.

2) Social

Students were clearly engaged in social learning and do value spaces that allow them to meet, talk and mix social and work time. Many of the groups were made up of friends who worked together for mutual support rather than on the same assignment. One student preferred the library as it was "convivial".

There is also a desire amongst some to see and been seen, or conversely to avoid seeing and being seen. For example phrases such as "It's nice to see your mates walking by", "My group are in here" (even though he was working alone), "The library is more acceptable if there are people there that you know", "Our friends are all here" or "I'm less likely to be disturbed by friends in the library – they all go to the computer rooms" "I won't be interrupted by people I know" (hidden in a corner of the Park Library silent area) were coded to a theme of Friends. Other key themes were Groups (which could be made up of friends or be course generated), Meetings and Atmosphere (see the convivial comment above). Social reasons may also explain the (mainly female) Occupational Therapists congregating in an area next to the rooms used by the (mainly male) Police trainees, although this is purely supposition.

It was also clear that in the case of Park library there was also a significant amount of purely social activity – chatting, using Facebook or other social networking tools, watching videos on their laptops etc. This mirrors Bourdieu and Saint Martin (1994) who identified 22 out of 33 types of activity in Lille University Library to be unrelated to study. These sort of distractions are perhaps to be expected in other social spaces like the restaurant but the library is usually seen as a more 'academic' environment.

3) Environmental

Themes in this category included quiet or silent study eg "Downstairs is too hectic", "It is quieter than downstairs" and there was some expressed desire for warmth (the weather was cold during the period of the interviews), natural light and especially for space to spread out.

Many students liked the fact that they could design their own space to some extent in the Park Library consortium area. This ability to define what happens in a space, for example pulling tables together or creating an enclosed space with screens, encourages a feeling of territoriality and ownership that is important to students

4) Emotional

This is the most difficult to quantify although there was clearly a strong attachment to areas by individuals and groups. "I work better here", "We always sit in the same place", "I feel comfortable in this space" were echoed by a number of students and categorised as being emotional attachments to an area that go above convenience or purely environmental comfort factors.

There was also a group mentality in choosing areas which is sometimes, but not always, linked to resources, for example: "This is the Education bit" (BAQTS in the School Experience section of Park Library) or "It's where the sports people go" (Top floor of Park Library). This was often linked to social factors eg "It is more important to be near people – the 3rd years over there can help if I'm stuck". Such comments were gathered into the theme of peer support and were interpreted as having a more emotional resonance attached to the space than the support of friends sitting at the first available table (social) or help desks or staff availability (resources). Researchers including Bourdieu and Saint Martin (1994) and Scannell and Gifford (2010) suggest that people will become attached to places that facilitate entry into social groups or that reinforce a social identity. Sitting in the library would offer an easy entry into the identity of a 'student' while sitting amongst fellow sports students or historians would help reinforce an academic subject identity.

The literature of place attachment highlights the idea of spaces having powerful symbolic meanings (for example, Scannell and Gifford, 2010). These are usually buildings or environments with special religious or national meaning but work is now widening to include social sites such as football grounds (Charleston, 2009) and we can perhaps apply this emotional response to learning spaces. The idea of the library as a repository of knowledge, at the heart of the university, is a powerful one and some students may be hoping that by being in that environment, rather than at home or in another social learning space, they would somehow be inspired to work. The desire to be seen by their peers to be 'working' by being in an academic

space may also account for the continued popularity of the library as a work space when many students are not actively using physical resources found there.

What students like and don't like about learning environments

There were significant levels of satisfaction with the areas provided, particularly in the libraries and Park campus IT Centre. This is perhaps best illustrated by the comment in reply to a question about an ideal learning space – "Like the library only more so". Students particularly valued quiet areas, space to spread out, resources close by (books, journals and software), food and drink to hand, scanners, power, open areas, light and airy spaces with windows and natural light and comfy chairs. Dislikes mirrored these, with the added complaint against students 'not working' but playing online games or using social networking sites, especially in the IT suites.

These preferences are perhaps to be expected. Any design for new spaces would ideally include comfort, natural light and be as IT rich as possible. The comments about students not working in IT areas raise interesting questions about control of learning spaces. These lie outside of the scope of this article but any design of social space should consider if the areas need to be policed in any way and whether this needs a strong staff presence or can be achieved using software solutions.

What students want in an ideal space

Students were asked to describe their ideal learning spaces. These tended to be expressed as more of the same rather than radical changes.

Easily the most popular desire was for more computers even though laptop use is growing. Many students said that they only had their laptop with them because they couldn't get on a fixed PC. Allied to this is a desire for more power points, scanners and printers. There were also requests for printing from wireless and wider wireless access across the campus. Over half of the interviewees said that they would like some variant of a library café and more wanted either snack vending machines and/or water fountains. The library group study rooms were very popular and many interviewees wanted more of them as well as dedicated silent areas, although few students use the latter areas in the libraries. There was also support for more flexible areas where students could effectively 'nest' behind screens (eg the Park library consortium area). There was clearly a desire for big tables to spread out on or work as a group. This desire was not confined to those doing group work.

There was little that was not an extension of that which was already provided somewhere on campus: more of the same rather than a radical rethinking of spaces. The experience at Northampton was that students will not easily move away from their immediate experience even when given a blank canvas. Offering students a range of options to choose from (for example beanbags, sofas or upright chairs) might be a more fruitful strategy than a completely open question.

Conclusion

Findings reflect the work done elsewhere in the sector and our experience of working with and observing students at the University. However, the strong clustering of influences into four complementary and related categories in resources, social, environmental and emotional factors should influence planning for the design of learning spaces. It was a rare student who only expressed their needs under one of these categories and there are clear dangers in concentrating on one to the exclusion of the others.

The creation of comfortable, flexible and resource intensive (via wireless) social learning spaces is, given appropriate funding, relatively easy to achieve. However, the social and emotional reasons expressed by students for their choice of study space are more difficult to replicate. Students have multiple identities (for example the same person could be a first year, an international student, be a mature student, be in the Business School, be an accountancy student, be in the football team etc) and may not therefore fit easily into areas designated, or perceived to be, for one group. We should be careful of excluding students from areas based on classification of the user rather than on function, for example 'research' space reserved for postgraduate or research students when undergraduates researching for a dissertation would need similar facilities. Assumptions about behaviour of groups are dangerous – not all undergraduates are inevitably noisy and not all postgraduates are consistently studious in shared spaces. The experience of other universities who have created areas for particular groups is not encouraging, with expensively equipped areas left unused or colonised by sub-groups of those for whom it was designed, for example postgraduate areas becoming effectively a space for *international* postgraduates. Groups will tend to find their own spaces based on a number of factors and may resist being pigeonholed.

Learning spaces should be designed with the flexibility to allow students to create their own social groupings. Large tables, good sight lines, an open feel will all attract those students who wish to be seen or who wish to congregate as a group. Equally nooks and corners, single tables and quiet, more enclosed spaces will encourage those who seek solitude to use the spaces. An emotional attachment is more difficult to engineer. It is often linked to the social in that an area becomes 'theirs' through their affiliation with a particular group but we should also recognise that some areas on a campus will be used as learning spaces regardless of their original purpose. A university should be happy for this to happen as long as health and safety or important operational issues are not compromised and make those areas more conducive to study without dissipating the factors that originally attracted the students, for example putting a few chairs and a coffee machine in a foyer that has students regularly sitting on the floor with their laptops.

The need to see and be seen is important to many students and a central space like the library or restaurant provides visibility to a greater number of their peers. Moreover, the idea of a library as being somewhere where thinking and writing is done surrounded by the accumulated knowledge of the ages is a unique and powerful pull, even if the student ends up there chatting to friends. In an increasingly digital environment, where online resources and mobile access is the norm it may be tempting to downgrade the importance of the library as a learning space and concentrate on developing other social learning spaces. The social and emotional aspects of the library as a space should not be underestimated however, and not easily replicated. More work is needed on

applying attachment theory to those buildings, like the library, that embody the idea of a university.

Much of the current planning and design for new learning spaces is done on a top down basis. The student voice is often missing but the success of learning spaces depends on them. In UK higher education the realisation that students are customers of a university, certainly in their expectation of a robust learning infrastructure which includes well resourced and comfortable learning environments, is growing. There are clear financial implications to this but involving the student voice should also encourage them to work within boundaries. A university may not be able to deliver everything, but even refurbishments will involve significant sums and some return on that investment measured by usage of the space and raised quantitative and qualitative satisfaction measures is important. Recognising the four major influences on choice of a learning space (resources, social, environmental and emotional) and gathering the student voice to recognise local variations within these categories will enhance the chances of successful campus design.

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