

Share a space for some thought: The dynamics of a learning space

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Shared learning spaces promote learning communities, and when academic and professional staff share a space with first year students in addition to experienced later year students from all disciplines, the “nuts and bolts” are in place for a stimulating learning environment. This session provides participants with a simulated tour of James Cook University’s Cairns Learning Centre where first year students are provided with a foundation for their university experience and receive their first taste of the power of peer support networks. The session presents the voices of individuals and groups who use the Learning Centre to prompt further analysis and discussion of a model that may help us prepare for tomorrow’s learning spaces today.

Introduction

Wainwright (2004) argues, “the key to collaborative facility success is not co-location but the total re-design of service delivery within an integrated university approach” (p.4). Chism & Bickford (2002) identify flexibility, access to technology and interaction and a match to learning goals as common factors amongst the many principles regarding effective learning space. Anders, Calder, Elder & Logan (2009) suggest that a model of a shared staff/student space offers the most exciting possibility for future learning space design. There are a number of examples where new teaching and learning spaces have been developed (Jamieson, 2003), yet there appear to be few examples where both staff and students share open collaborative working and learning spaces.

The data presented at this “nuts and bolts” session are drawn from ongoing studies and evaluations over the past nine years (Calder, 2002; 2004; Anders et al, 2009) and show that the functional considerations driving student use of learning space in the Cairns Learning Centre are related to the need for various levels of service and a desire for collaborative, reflective and social spaces, all of which are in turn driven by the academic pursuit at hand. In the following sections first year students, mentors and academic staff provide personal reflections on how the learning space is used.

The nut – Learning Advice Corner

Groups and individual students are encouraged to discuss their assignments with the learning adviser at a round table. This is a collaborative, neutral and open space where the learning adviser works with students to tease out the requirements of an assignment in terms of its structure,

format, language and style. Students are encouraged to find answers to their questions through prompting and group discussion and nearby students are often drawn into the discussion. No appointment is required but learning advisers are only available at specified times. Thus, the “consultations” move away from the learning adviser as expert identifying the flaws in the student’s work, to one who facilitates a process that makes “the university familiar to newcomers by peeling off its labels and probing its strangeness” (O’Regan, 2005, p.135).

The learning advice corner is a great idea. Four of us from nursing got some valuable ideas on the critical incident assignment. We sort of understood what it was about but the exercise we did on structuring and planning made things a lot simpler.

We both went there and asked about referencing. I didn’t even know they had sample essays in the Learning Centre. It was good to see what the lecturer penalised them for in their referencing. I also didn’t know that there was stuff on the website about writing.

The thread – Student Mentors

The student mentors are referred to as a thread because they are integrated into most Cairns campus first year initiatives (Treston, 1999), including the Learning Centre space.

It's also made people more willing to mentor because it's a comfortable place, it's a safe environment - it makes it easier to do the mentoring. I think in this room I've been of more help to people than I ever was before.

Before mentors were just a notion or a name and now there's actually a place so it actually fits in quite well to the University 'cause any area of importance in the University has got a space, so before we actually got this space mentors, I don't think, were taken too seriously until the space was given.

I feel confident that I will pass and that relates mostly to coming in here and all the help I got from staff and mentors. I think I would have been quite lost if it wasn't for the help.

The Lubricant – First Year Students

The students who access the Learning Centre for assistance are primarily first year students from all faculties and schools. The first year students provide a common purpose for all the staff and other later year students and mentors to be there. Equity Officers, Disability Resources Officers, Learning Advisers and Academic Staff Developers all have offices that open out on to an open shared learning space, conference room and kitchenette. This is one of the few areas on the campus where students from all schools and faculties can work and socialise together and also have ready access to staff.

It helps people work together... its a place where students and staff, undergraduates and graduates can meet and talk informally about issues affecting their course with someone in their own course obviously... but the cross faculty meetings... are also helpful as well.

It's given it a sense of community...it's made it like now we've really gotten to know other people sitting in here and working here instead of just sticking to our own education group. We've crossed over all faculties.

The bolt – The Academic Link

The integration of all Learning Centre activities with academic programs through embedding learning and writing programs into the curriculum as well as through close working relationships with academic staff have been key factors in improving the first year experience at JCU Cairns. Academic staff provide the following observations.

I have reflected on the nature of the power relationship between teacher and student. In response, and in accordance with my philosophy of student empowerment and flexible practice, for a number of years I have moved from my environment (office) to my students' own 'place' in the Learning Centre or library. I encourage students to participate there in small group or individual discussion with me, or their peers, on topics of concern, assessment tasks and topical legal issues.

I think the idea of having an academic staff member provide a referee check when a student applies to become a mentor is a sensible way of ensuring that lecturers are stakeholders in the type of peer support that is provided in the Learning Centre.

Discussion points for session

- Do session participants have similar models?
- What were the institutional challenges of setting up a Cairns Learning Centre model?
- What are the downsides of such a model?
- Does this model have applications on larger campuses?
- How do we plan future learning spaces to meet the needs of first year students?

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