

A CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN CREATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the development of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) and in particular the creativity zones. It explores the idea of a 'creative space' and the potential influences on its development from concepts of 'physical space', 'virtual space', and 'personal space'. It raises issues about the learning needs within the zone and how these may pose challenges to learners and teacher/facilitators alike, and questions how the CETL staff can optimally support its use. It finishes with an invitation to engage in the area to the benefit of all.

Keywords: creativity, learning spaces, learning and teaching, facilitation

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of the 'creative spaces' as part of the CETL in Creativity has started a voyage of discovery into not only the question: "what is creativity?" but also what technology and which learning and teaching approaches best support the creative process.

2 BACKGROUND TO THE CETL

The Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) initiative to create Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) was designed to give national focus to a range of subject areas and provide a catalyst and resource for the rest of the sector. Many Universities applied for them and 74 were awarded across the sector, including the CETL in Creativity called 'InQbate' which was a joint bid from the neighbouring Universities of Brighton and Sussex. Our aim was to offer a facility and a service to our Universities and others in the research, development and use of creativity across the curriculum. We each have a creativity space and a support team, but they have been used in complementary ways. Both of these are flexible spaces, packed with IT support, catering for individuals through to small and large groups.

There has been a collaborative approach to the development process across the two universities with an integrated support structure and common 'InQbate' website. However, local factors including educational and physical contexts and installation issues have dominated the development of the two zones within the constraints of the HEFCE funding. Brighton has combined its CETL resource with other initiatives to form a design suite, where the CETL is an important element of our Product Design courses.

3 THE CHANGING LEARNING SPACE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Since the 1950's in the United Kingdom there has been what Barnett [1] calls an 'elite to mass' change in the numbers of people entering higher education. This dramatic rise in numbers has been driven by ideals of both creating a fairer society and increasing capital for the economy. As the numbers and diversity of students has increased, so too has what Toffler [2] called the increasingly 'rapid obsolescence of knowledge'. As the speed and nature of knowledge and the social and technological world changes ever faster and becomes more complex, it is vital, if we are to avoid what Knowles [3] calls the potential 'catastrophe of human obsolescence', to help learners acquire the skills of 'learning how to learn' and of 'self-directed inquiry' Knowles [4].

The combined pressures of increased students numbers with a greater diversity of backgrounds and learning needs, speed of change of knowledge, government calls for greater efficiency in the teaching process and developments in information technology along with greater understanding of learning and teaching have led to the adoption of new styles of teaching. The traditional, teacher centred, transmission model of learning accompanied by the 'sage on the stage' has begun to change to a more facilitative approach to teaching which is learner centred and where the teacher becomes the 'guide on the side'. Barr and Tagg [5] see this shift from an 'instructional' to a 'learning paradigm' as changing the role of HE from a 'place of instruction' to a place to 'produce learning'.

In response to these pressures, governments and education institutions have been modernising their buildings to support the perceived shift in learner requirements, pedagogic approaches and the effect of new technology. However, surprisingly there is little hard evidence as yet to support the premise that improvements in the learning environment improve learning. In their literature review 'The Impact of School Environments' for the Design Council in 2005[6], the researchers found that, "It is extremely difficult to come to firm conclusions about the impact of learning environments because of the multi-faceted nature of environments and the subsequent diverse and disconnected nature of research literature". Both this and the 'Spaces for Learning' [7] review of learning spaces in further and higher education for the Scottish Funding Council in 2006, agree that there is evidence that poor ventilation or noise can have negative effects on staff and learners. However the positive effects on learning are less clear when learning environments come up to the minimum standards, though there is some evidence that staff and students respond positively to enhanced buildings and landscaping.

4 THE CREATIVE SPACE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The idea of having a special 'creative space' in which to work and be creative is not new. Since early Renaissance times, artists have had their 'studio' as mostly a private place in which to develop ideas in safety. Likewise writers may go to a retreat or engineers and designers have a workshop in which to fashion their ideas. These spaces may vary with individual needs and include specialist tools, materials or research, but many have privacy at their core where the individual can take risks without external judgement or even ridicule.

The CETL creative spaces are grounded in this tradition but are strongly influenced by the changing needs of the 21st century learner, new approaches to the facilitation of learning and the potential for modern technologies to enhance the creative process.

5 THE CONTEXT OF THE BRIGHTON CREATIVITY ZONE

Product Design in the School of Engineering at Brighton consists of courses for students and companies, design consultancy for industry (especially SME) and services for the HE Sector. There is a significant synergy in this topology. Students get many real industrial projects and industry based competitions, opportunities for placements and can experience new and effective teaching and learning paradigms. The South East Knowledge Exchange (SEKE: a partnership between Brighton, Portsmouth and Buckinghamshire and Chilterns Universities) offers design services to industry, can use the Creativity facilities and provides placements for a number of our best students.

The Creativity Zone offers research and pedagogical development facilities for the sector as well as resource and advice for students from courses across the University. Activities are recorded and may be accessed via the web. The facility is available for academics from other universities and industry as well (through the SEKE). Research on creativity is encouraged through networking, offering grants and disseminating results.

6 THE UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON CREATIVITY ZONE

The creativity zone comprises a large technology enhanced space, a seminar room for 50 people and offices for centre staff. The facilities in the main space 'Leonardo' include data projectors, programmed coloured lighting, sound systems, connections for computers, temperature control and even smell that can be altered to help create a mood. The space has a write-on-able wall and moving panels that can change the shape of the space or create a cave. Back projection on a large curved screen and 3-sided cell can create total immersion for groups or individuals. The smaller space 'Galileo' has 3D projection capability and the technology to observe what is going on in the larger space. A wide variety of technical and facilitative back-up is available in the Zone to allow programming of the local environment and support learning activities.

One of the most important aspects of the creativity zone is that it has been built in conjunction with, and as part of, new design studios for 150 product design students as part of the Centre for Design Technology within the School of Engineering. Although the Zone is intended for cross-university use, it is potentially a great resource for these students' development as designers.

It is interesting to compare the types of spaces in this zone with those in the 'Bridges' CETL in the University of Bedfordshire. Jankowska [8] describes their area as containing three distinct spaces:

- A Creative Space, which is similar in design and purpose to Brighton's large space though with slightly less technology;
- A Formal Space, which is similar to Brighton's Seminar room;
- Lastly a Social Learning Space, designed to enhance learning in social settings.

The Brighton zone has a social space adjacent to the creative and formal spaces but it has not been conceptualised in quite the same way.

7 THE CONCEPT OF A CREATIVE SPACE

Although there is a domain of literature about creative thinking and techniques that can be effective in stimulating creative thinking, there is little about the spaces in which this type of thinking and learning can take place. In reference to the Creativity Zones it may be useful to conceptualise them as having a 'physical space', a 'virtual space' and a 'personal space'.

The **physical space** is the environment in which creative activity takes place. This may vary in nature dependant on personal preference or need or chosen discipline from writer, artist, designer or engineer. The physical space in the creativity zone is a large, flexible, technically enhanced enclosed area, as previously described, which is intended to facilitate creative thinking and activity for large numbers of learners.

The **virtual space** encompasses not only connections between individuals and groups within the zone but also between zones and through the worldwide web to the wider world community. Opportunities for learners can be provided in various interactive forms, but also the learner has greater freedom to make connections and to trace interests and interest groups in the virtual environment. In addition, the potential to collaborate with other institutions both in the UK and in other countries is far greater through communication in the virtual space than it could ever be in the physical space. There are, however, increasingly well understood barriers to use of e-learning technologies that need to be better understood.

The **personal or internal space** for learning, is shaped by many characteristics of individual learners and by the contexts in which people live, work, socialise and learn.

A learner's personal values, beliefs and perceptions arise from cultural influences of family, friends, religion, society, gender, profession, discipline and biographical experiences. These form the basis of the filters through which learners decide how, or even if, to engage in learning activities or creative processes. Further perceptions surrounding attitudes and expectations of fellow learners and teachers or employers, even ones emotional state may also positively or negatively affect the outcomes of engagement in creative activities. It is therefore evident that both the ground rules for engagement in the zone and style of teaching are crucial to success.

This is born out by Goodall cited in Jankowska [9] who characterises the Innovation Lab (iLab) as having 3 main components. Firstly, it has a 'dedicated space' which does not resemble normal working conditions and has similar technology to the Brighton Creativity Spaces. Secondly, co-operative ways of working are used to encourage engagement and contributions from everyone. Thirdly, facilitation techniques are employed to stimulate open and creative thinking. The important point raised here is that the creative spaces themselves will only enable creativity to happen if co-operative, democratic and facilitative approaches to the learning and creative process are adopted by both learners and teachers.

8 THE CREATIVITY ZONE AND THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER: THE PEDAGOGY OF CREATIVITY

It follows from the issues raised so far that the success or otherwise of the Creativity Centres may hinge as much on the teaching and learning philosophies and paradigms adopted as through the technology employed. The creativity zone may therefore present challenges to the traditionally conceived roles and practices of the teachers and learners who engage with it.

If one views the post modern world as Bauman [10] sees it, as in a state of 'liquid modernity', then the theory of learning which correlates with this worldview is 'social constructivism' in which meaning and knowledge are created and re-created within each individual through social interaction. If we view creativity as requiring a fluid state of possibilities where the elements of creativity are essentially uncertain, then a facilitative approach to learning becomes a necessity.

Erica McWilliam [11] in her paper 'Unlearning how to Teach' argues that a shift from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side' has enabled focus to shift from teacher to learner centred education. However to address present and future needs of learners she proposes a change of the teacher to 'meddler-in-the-middle' or even to co-creator. In this view of the learning / teaching process, the learner and teacher make a joint inquiry into the process of creativity which some may perceive as threatening.

The evolving creativity centre philosophy is constructivist in nature and sits mainly between the mentor and meddler models of teaching thus recognising that learning and creativity are developed within the learner from their experience and not delivered externally via endless power-point presentations. It must be recognised however that the concept of 'creativity' has a wide range of meanings which vary from discipline to discipline and it also has a wide variety of traditional approaches to teaching it within those disciplines. Part of our work will be to inquire into, engage with, challenge and learn from that variety and disseminate our findings.

9 ISSUES AND EARLY INSIGHTS

This paper raises lots of issues and questions, many contentious and many yet to be addressed. They include:-

- What is meant by creativity and how does it relate to learning?
- How can we evaluate or assess the success of creativity in the centre?
- To what extent can provision of a flexible physical space with a range of physical and technological resources contribute to creative learning?
- To what extent can e-learning technologies and exploration of the wider electronic environment contribute to creative learning?
- How can learners deliberately create space for themselves in which to experience creative, sometimes transformative learning?
- How can teachers / facilitators best support learning and creativity in the zone?

Observations of the first sessions to be held in the Brighton Creativity Centre have strongly reinforced the team's views that the quality of teaching/facilitation is core to the success or failure of the learning or creativity that may take place there. It is apparent that it is not just a lack of familiarity with the new potentials on offer in the space that limits outcomes. Though both learners and teachers often seem reluctant to move around or reconfigure the space, it is mainly the combination of a lack of facilitative skills and perhaps fear of leaving the comfort zone of traditional teacher control that are, at present, the main limiting factors. From the learner perspective, transformational learning and creativity need a safe environment in which to be fostered and whilst the space may be 'nice' to be in, facilitators need to actively develop a safe psychological space if learners are to take the necessary risks inherent in the creative process.

As a result of these early observations the centre team is planning not just a technical induction to the space but to work closely with staff using the centre to help them plan more effective sessions and even help them deliver sessions where appropriate. Thus the centre-team's function is moving firmly into the facilitation of teaching, learning and

creativity which is a staff development role within the institution. We will also have a major role in trialing and researching what works from the complex mix of variables including facilitation and creative skills and processes within the centres physical and technological context.

The Creativity Centre is a wonderful opportunity not only to explore the possibilities of creativity in such a technologically enhanced environment and re-configurable space, but also the learning and teaching processes which will best support the learners and teachers creative odyssey.

If you are interested in the issues raised in this paper and/or wish to explore how the 'creativity zone' could benefit your facilitation of creativity please contact us.

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