

1 Transforming learning spaces for multilingual interaction: the outcomes of a workshop delivered at the 2020 eLearning Symposium

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Abstract

The design of innovative learning spaces currently affects different educational sectors, including university teaching and learning. A parallel can be identified between the weakening of the specialisation of spaces for formal, informal, life-long learning, social interaction, and leisure and the blurring of the boundaries between work/learning and social engagement. Furthermore, a user-centred approach to space design mirrors the ongoing development towards student-centred education, and the emphasis on making these spaces digitally competitive equally reflects the increasing integration of technologies in teaching and learning. This contribution is the report of a workshop delivered at the eLearning Symposium, 24th January 2020, Southampton, which explored possible designs for a learning space conducive to multilingual communication, collaboration, and creativity.

Keywords: space design, language teaching/learning, technology.

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1. Introduction

This contribution is concerned with the workshop titled ‘Transforming learning spaces for multilingual interaction’, delivered at the eLearning Symposium, 24th January 2020, Southampton. In this short paper, the content of the workshop is outlined and its outcomes reported.

The workshop focused on the re-design of a physical space that is currently embedded in the Language Centre of the University of Nottingham and specialises in supporting the teaching and learning of modern foreign languages. The purpose of the workshop was to generate innovative design ideas and encourage the participants, predominantly language teachers, to reflect on the design of similar learning spaces in their institutions. The workshop delivery included two distinct sessions; an introduction in which the re-design project and the principles underpinning the practice were outlined, and a hands-on session that engaged the participants in designing learning activities and the related physical spaces.

The space in question, known as the Self Access Centre (SAC), currently functions as a language learning resource centre offering a service to students and staff across the university. The SAC currently hosts language textbooks and dictionaries, magazines and newspapers, and drill-and-practice digital resources accessible through desktop PCs. In terms of furniture, the SAC includes PC booths, bookshelves, one large table, and two areas with low seats with coffee tables.

In December 2018 and 2019, a survey was conducted to gain intelligence on the use of the space. Below is a short summary of the most relevant results:

- 71% of students using the SAC are language specialists;
- 47% use it weekly, 18.6% daily, and 34.3% occasionally; and
- 57.8% use their own devices, 67.6% use the SAC PCs, and 48% use the SAC analogue resources.

2. The SAC re-design project

Prompted by the claims that there is a link between space and learning (Blith & Crook, 2017) and by the notion of built pedagogy (Monahan, 2002) according to which learning is affected by the space within which it takes place, the present state of the SAC is not aligned with current pedagogical trends that place the students at the centre of social constructivist learning experiences. In addition, its emphasis on language-drill resources is contradictory to the communicative language teaching style of teaching practices at Nottingham. Hence, the SAC re-design project was initiated, driven by the wish to transform the existing space into a new flexible, inspiring, future-proofed area to support digitally enhanced, communicative, collaborative, and creative learning and teaching.

A number of considerations have been identified as the drivers for the SAC re-design project. These are:

- learning happens all the time and everywhere; heavily supported by technology and the ease of access to resources that it provides, learning is no longer confined within the walls of classrooms and institutions but takes place at home, at school, at work, and in social places, and at any time;
- the boundaries between work and learning and social engagement are blurred as people become more connected due to social media; and
- the specialisation of spaces for formal, informal, life-long learning, social interaction, and leisure is weakened, reflected in the increasing attention paid to create flexible, and multipurpose spaces, in line with the multitasking nature of 21st century lifestyle.

A degree of inspiration sprang from a visit to the Oodi Central Library in Helsinki, Finland³. A public building described as

3. <https://www.oodihelsinki.fi/en/what-is-oodi>

“one of the freest buildings in Helsinki, or even the Nordic Countries, where the visitor can do many things and take initiative in what they want to do. It is a constantly learning and developing tool for those living in or visiting Helsinki” (Oodi website⁴).

Through a vibrant and modern space design,

“Oodi is a meeting place, a house of reading and a diverse urban experience. [It] provides its visitors with knowledge, new skills and stories, and is an easy place to access for learning, relaxation and work” (Oodi website⁵).

While the features of Oodi are not comparable to the scope of the SAC re-design project, it is our aspiration to achieve the vibrancy and social interaction that emerges from Oodi’s versatile and inspiring space design.

Other factors that influence our re-design ambitions are:

- the ubiquity of technology heavily impacts teaching and learning practices; and
- teaching and learning practices are increasingly adopted for the implementation of social constructivist pedagogies that put the learners at the centre of the educational experience.

These observations correlate with the principles underpinning JISC’s Sticky Campus project, by which

“[a] sticky campus is a digitally-enabled space where students want to spend time, even when they don’t have a formal teaching session to go to. It’s a learning environment designed to give students everything

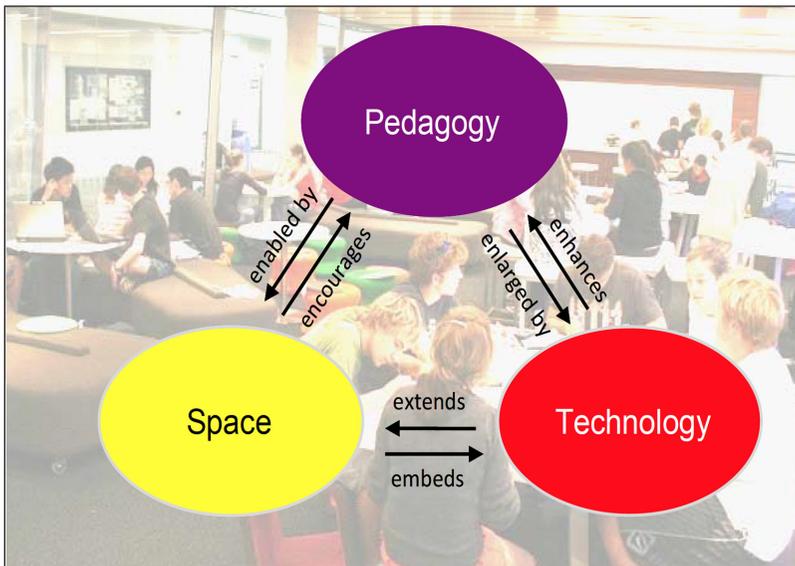
4. <https://www.oodihelsinki.fi/en/what-is-oodi/architecture/#:~:text=Oodi%20is%20one%20of%20the,living%20in%20or%20visiting%20Helsinki.>

5. <https://www.oodihelsinki.fi/en/services-and-facilities/>

they need for collaborative and solitary study, and to promote active learning. It supports inclusivity and enables rich learning experiences” (JISC, 2019, para 1).

The presence of technology in the relation between learning and spaces finds support in the *pedagogy-space-technology* model (Radcliff, 2009) by which pedagogy, space, and technology are tightly connected and have a reciprocal impact, enhancing, enabling, and extending each other’s scopes, functions, and roles (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Pedagogy-space-technology (Radcliff, 2009, p. 13⁶)



3. Our vision

JISC (2006) states that the individual spaces inside education buildings should be:

6. “Support for the original work was provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations”.

- flexible – to accommodate both current and evolving pedagogies;
- future-proofed – to enable space to be re-allocated and reconfigured;
- bold – to look beyond tried and tested technologies and pedagogies;
- creative – to energise and inspire learners and tutors;
- supportive – to develop the potential of all learners; and
- enterprising – to make each space capable of supporting different purposes (Radcliff, 2009, p. 13).

With this set of principles in mind, the SAC re-design project envisages the shaping of an educational space that:

- invites students to spend time in it, beyond course requirements (cf. Sticky Campus⁷);
- supports interactions in different languages;
- is conducive to collaborative learning and teaching;
- provides students and teachers with the digitally competitive facilities;
- supports creativity especially in media production; and
- is able to cope with different types of activities, ideally happening at the same time, reflecting the multitasking nature of the 21st century lifestyle.

4. Method: one hour workshop

During the workshop, the participants (eight postgraduates and 13 academic staff) were introduced to the thinking behind the SAC re-design project and were asked to engage in activities that elicited ideas as well as reflection on the purposes and shape of learning spaces in the context of language learning and teaching.

The participants were divided into randomly formed groups and the questions were presented one at a time by the authors of this contribution, and intervals of

7. <http://www.thestickycampus.com/>

five to ten minutes were included for the participant to generate their responses. They used flipchart sheets, colour coded post-its, and pen markers to provide and structure their answers. After each question, all groups were given the opportunity to feedback their ideas to the other groups.

The participants were asked to:

- generate ideas for collaborative teaching and learning activities that could take place in the new space;
- identify the technologies that would support those activities;
- think creatively about the type of furniture that best suited the collaborative teaching and learning nature of the new space – for this part of the activity, the participants were asked to draw a floor plan and draw on it their furniture solutions; and
- brainstorm for a catchy name that reflects the purposes of the space.

The outcomes of the workshop are tentatively addressed below.

5. Results and considerations on the outcomes

Responses to the first task, i.e. generating ideas for collaborative teaching and learning activities that could take place in the new space, included:

- poster presentations;
- cultural demonstrations;
- role plays;
- debating;
- language games;
- skill exchange sessions;
- student-led sessions;

- conversation practice (language café);
- task-based language teaching;
- exhibition space;
- cultural events;
- cinema;
- global issues debate space;
- chill-out zone; and
- virtual reality to learn how to act in different situations and cultures.

Responses to the second task, i.e. identifying the technologies that would support those activities, included:

- whiteboard;
- projector;
- media editing software;
- computers;
- smartphone equipment;
- video/multimedia;
- large screen;
- virtual reality software and hardware; and
- platform to book the space.

Suggestions for suitable furniture (third task) included:

- movable chairs and desks (multidimensional furniture);
- comfortable seating;
- walls that can be moved;
- tables with embedded plugs (computers, multiuse);
- different lights around the room;
- lockers;
- water fountain; and
- multicultural decorations.

Finally, suggestions for a name for the new space included:

- Inspiring Learning Hub;
- Chatty Centre;
- Interactive Learning Lounge;
- Communication Interactive Learning Lounge;
- Open Learning Hub;
- Digital Voice Hub;
- Multilingual Suite;
- e-Media Café;
- Language Exchange Corner; and
- Multilingual Communication Learning Space.

The participants' responses, while in net contrast with the present state of the SAC, given its current emphasis on analogue materials and its focus on individual self-study resources, were highly consistent with the plan of the SAC re-design project to create a flexible and innovative space to foster digitally enhanced, student-centred, collaborative, and communicative language learning and teaching. In particular, the activities suggested in the first task corroborate our need for a space that supports multilingual communication and collaboration, e.g. conversation practice, debating, exhibition space. Furthermore, they support our ongoing transformation towards student-centred education, e.g. presentations, student-led sessions; and highlight the significance of transforming language learning activities into cultural exchanges, e.g. cultural events and global issues debates. They also emphasise the importance of providing opportunities for the development of transferable skills, e.g. skill exchange sessions, task-based language teaching, and of integrating extra-curricular activities, e.g. chill-out zone or cinema in our study programmes.

Similar observations hold for the list of possible names for the new space. These embed features like technology, inspiration, exchange, openness, multilingualism, communication, and social engagement, reflecting the nature of the activities that it would host. Finally, the participants' suggestions for the technology and the furniture to be located in the new space are aligned with the teaching and learning activities proposed and tally with our need to optimise and rationalise educational spaces with multipurpose and flexible solutions.

6. Conclusion

The workshop reported in this paper aimed to elicit reflections on the significance of educational spaces and to generate space design ideas that support communicative and collaborative language teaching and learning.

The workshop provided insights from academics from different institutions, including the input from the eight student participants who added the learners' perspectives to the re-design ideas. The outcomes of the workshop will inform the next phases of the SAC re-design project. In particular, the ideas generated in the workshop will provide supporting external evidence for the project business case and will influence the ideation and realisation of the new space.

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