Chapter 1. Space as a Change Agent

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Spaces are themselves agents for change. Changed spaces will change practice.[1]

Learning is the central activity of colleges and universities. Sometimes that learning occurs in classrooms (formal learning); other times it results from serendipitous interactions among individuals (informal learning). Space—whether physical or virtual—can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration, and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness. More and more we see the power of *built pedagogy* (the ability of space to define how one teaches) in colleges and universities.

This e-book collection—chapters, examples, and images—presents learning space design from the perspective of those who create learning environments: faculty, learning technologists, librarians, and administrators. Other books focus on architectural and facilities issues; this e-book collection makes no attempt to duplicate them, despite their importance. This e-book focuses on less often discussed facets of learning space design: learner expectations, the principles and activities that facilitate learning, and the role of technology. Three trends catalyzed this collection:

- Changes in our students
- Information technology
- Our understanding of learning

Today's students—whether 18, 22, or 55—have attitudes, expectations, and constraints that differ from those of students even 10 years ago. Learning spaces often reflect the people and learning approach of the times, so spaces designed in 1956 are not likely to fit perfectly with students in 2006.

Many of today's learners favor active, participatory, experiential learning—the learning style they exhibit in their personal lives. But their behavior may not match their self-expressed learning preferences when sitting in a large lecture hall with chairs bolted to the floor. The single focal point at the front of the room sends a strong signal about how learning will occur. A central theme of this e-book is how to reconceptualize learning spaces to facilitate active, social, and experiential learning.

Students are also highly social, connecting with friends, family, and faculty face-to-face and online. They say they find great value in being with other people and want their college experience to promote those connections. Yet the way they establish and maintain their personal and professional networks may be anything but traditional. Facebook.com, instant messaging, and cell-phone photos coexist with conversations over coffee.

To most faculty and administrators, students appear to have no fear of technology. Mobile phones, digital cameras, and MP3 players constitute today's backpack. Browsing, downloading, and messaging happen anywhere and anytime.

Another characteristic of students has an impact on space: time constraints. The majority of today's students work part time (often 30 or more hours per week), commute, and have outside responsibilities. Even traditional-age, residential students exhibit the most common student characteristic: lack of time. With student attention pulled in multiple directions, how can learning spaces bring students and faculty together, ensuring that the environment promotes, rather than constrains, learning?

Information technology has changed what we do and how we do it. It would be hard to identify a discipline in which IT is not a necessity. Collecting, analyzing, displaying, and disseminating knowledge typically involves IT. Retrieving information has become an IT function; students consider the Internet, not the library, their information universe. And, rather than trying to know everything, students and faculty rely on networks of peers and databases of information. What impact, if any, should this have on learning space design?

Technology has also brought unique capabilities to learning. Whether by stimulating more interaction through the use of personal response systems or by videoconferencing with international experts, IT has altered learning spaces.

What we know about how people learn has also changed our ideas about learning space. There is value from bumping into someone and having a casual conversation. There is value from hands-on, active learning as well as from discussion and reflection. There is value in being able to receive immediate support when needed and from being able to integrate multiple activities (such as writing, searching, and computing) to complete a project. And, there is value from learning that occurs in authentic settings, such as an estuary or on a trading floor. How do we turn the entire campus—and many places off campus—into an integrated learning environment?

As we have come to understand more about learners, how people learn, and technology, our notions of effective learning spaces have changed. Increasingly, those spaces are flexible and networked, bringing together formal and informal activities in a seamless environment that acknowledges that learning can occur anyplace, at any time, in either physical or virtual spaces. We have also come to understand that design is a process, not a product. Involving all stakeholders—particularly learners—is essential.

This e-book represents an ongoing exploration. We know that space can have a significant impact on teaching and learning. Exactly how we bring together space, technology, and pedagogy will continue to evolve. I hope you will find this exploration of learning spaces helpful as you and your institution work to ensure learner success.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank this e-book's authors for their insightful contributions. I'd also like to thank Cyprien Lomas and Chris Johnson for their help identifying many of the cases that make this collection so valuable.

Endnotes

1.   Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), *Designing Space for Effective Learning: A Guide to 21st Century Learning Space Design,* p. 30, <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/JISClearningspaces.pdf>.

About the Author

Diana Oblinger is a vice president at EDUCAUSE, where she directs the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI). Previously Oblinger served as the vice president for information resources and the chief information officer for the 16-campus University of North Carolina system and as a senior fellow for the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR). Prior to that she was the executive director of higher education for Microsoft Corporation and led the Institute for Academic Technology for IBM. Oblinger was on the faculty at Michigan State University and the University of Missouri–Columbia, where she also served as an academic dean. Oblinger has authored and edited numerous books and publications, including the award-winning *What Business Wants from Higher Education* and the first EDUCAUSE e-book, *Educating the Net Generation*, with James L. Oblinger.

Page Last Updated: Friday, November 03, 2006