

A CREATIVE AND EFFECTIVE PHYSICAL LEARNING SPACE

- Lessons learnt from the practise

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Abstract

Different kinds of learning environments aim to support students' learning. The challenge is to create a learning environment that both gives structure and guidance for working but also leaves freedom for creativity. This paper describes the development of the physical learning environment where marketing related business development projects are managed in teams. Experiences from the practise are presented in order to discuss what works and what the challenges are for the future.

Key words: higher education, learning spaces, marketing students

1. Introduction

Contemporary pedagogical approaches emphasize learner orientation rather than teaching orientation. This has resulted along with the Bologna process in the content of teaching needing to be defined as students' learning objectives, not just teaching themes. The success of a learning-oriented perspective depends on the creation of effective learning environments (Gonzalez, Ingram, LaForge & Leigh 2004; Young 2002) as we can facilitate deeper and richer learning when we design spaces with learning in mind (Chism 2006). An integrated learning environment has been suggested to improve the ability to be creative and effective in solving problems (Eickmann, Kolb & Kolb 2002). Even though the place where we learn is considered very important to learning, it has been argued that learning programs focus more on activities, with less focus on space and place (Beard & Wilson 2006: 79).

As our understanding of teaching and learning is changing towards a more constructive direction; also the learning environments need to be redesigned to reflect the changes in pedagogical development (Bransford 2000: 131; Oblinger 2006). Chism (2006) also notices that in recent studies the physical environment is an important characteristic of institutions that do exceptionally well in engaging their students. Even though there is a growing body of literature on learning environments in a broad sense (Herrington 2005; Higgins et al 2005; Paladino 2008), more research is needed to understand the design of more integrated and personalized physical learning environments.

The aim of this paper is discuss the implementation of the meaning-based learning environment model. First, the dimensions of the creative and effective physical learning space are discussed. Second the case of Concept Factory is presented and third, the experiences and lessons learnt of what works and what are the challenges are discussed.

2. Dimensions for creative and effective learning space

Jaskari has earlier (2009) developed a model of the dimensions of the creative and effective learning environment. The model is based on qualitative study on meanings that students at-

tach to theirs studies. She uses a metaphor of safety net to illustrate the dimensions of learning environment (Fig 1). Dimensions include business vs. pleasure, I vs. others, peace vs. inspiration and safe vs. extraordinary. These are elaborated below.

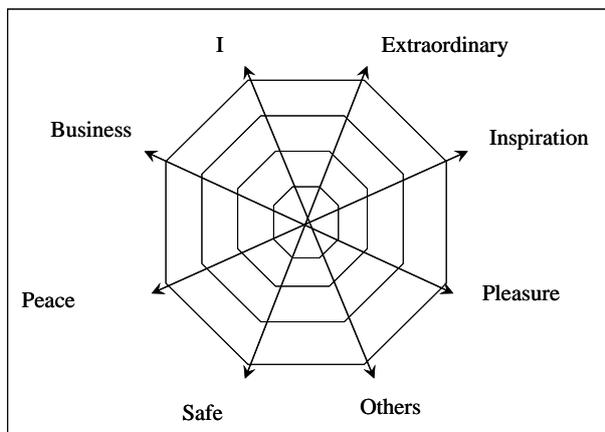


Figure 1. A safety net - dimensions of creative and effective learning space.

Business vs. pleasure

The dimension of business refers to meanings associated with attending to the lectures, doing team work, passing exams. These were often described as hard work, where the students need to schedule lectures and assignment in order to do them properly. There was a clear theme of goal orientation and self-motivation. Goal was described to be future working place, diploma from the school and learning itself.

On contrary to hard work the dimension of pleasure was discussed. Meanings associated with free time, relaxation and breaks. Quite often these matters were situated outside of university area. Parties, get-togethers with other students, exchange programs and travelling were mentioned. Within university area the coffee breaks and local café were mentioned several times. These situations were also described as more creative and inspirational opposed to stressful lectures, team work or studying alone.

I vs. others

The model reveals a juxtaposition and coexistence between individual and social aspects. The goals were described self-centered as my goals, my studies, my life, my future. There was an emphasis on describing what an individual does, how he studies, how he feels and proceeds in order to reach the goals. This may be partly due to the fact that studies are most often evaluated on individual bases as also the degree is personal. In the end, the individual mark count.

However, a there was a strong emphasis on social aspects. Friends, team work, social network, parties and communality were things pictured in collages and mentioned in interviews. Teamwork and working groups were mostly mentioned in a positive way, challenging the thinking, enhancing the learning and deepening the understanding. However, teamwork was also described de-motivating if the group didn't work or there were free riders present. Larger social network develops over time not only in university surroundings but at parties and other get-togethers as well. The social aspects are strongly supported by earlier literature, where social aspects are valued by students (Oblinger 2006) and social capital is regarded as one of the most crucial aspect in learning environment (Gonzalez, Ingram, LaForge and Leigh 2004).

Peace vs. inspiration

The students associated both peaceful and intense studying and inspiring actions to their studies. Peaceful concentration, time to read and think alone was needed to memorize things. Library was mentioned as learning environment that supports peaceful studying.

On the other hand, inspiration was gained through creative stimuli where new things were seen, tried and learnt. Quite often the peaceful and sometimes painful studying was related to studying at the university where as inspiring moments tended to happen outside university surroundings.

Safe vs. extraordinary

The dimension of safety is referring to students knowing what to do and what is expected from them. There is a need for feeling secure trying new things, discussing ideas with other students and coaches. They feel secure in representing their own ideas and do not fear that they are laughed at. There is a "license to make mistakes" as one student described it. The need for security is supported by Andersson (2006) who found out that many students fear of taking risks.

On the other hand there is a need to step to a new unknown territory, to challenge one self and to try new things, be creative. These adventures were often sought from trainee programs and travelling. Within the learning environment discussion, Chism (2006) argues that environments that provide experience, stimulate the senses and encourage the exchange of information are most likely to support learning.

Discussion of the framework

The dimensions elaborated above form the meaning base for creating new learning environments. However, there are several ways how to make the practical application. Choosing the place, designing it, choosing the furniture and technical support as well as planning the process are all important factors in designing the learning environment. Ready-made designs cannot be bought from the shelf. The extent to which and the ways in which the users are engaged in the learning environment design process determines the success or failure of the resulting design (Higgins et al 2005).

One of the challenges is to construct environments that support student's experiential learning process (Kolb 1984). For example, students may be resistant to adopting creative practices as there are barriers to expressing creativity such as fear of failure, fear of doing something different and fear of taking risks (Anderson 2006). Thus the external learning environment should support students' creativity, to facilitate trial-and-error, and to build confidence in students and their thinking.

In the changing world not one design solution lasts forever. User involvement must be continually refreshed and iterated to support ongoing change. This also creates an ownership of innovation every time. (Higgins et al 2005). Flexible learning space has been found to contribute positively to student engagement, collaboration, flexibility and learning (Neill & Etheridge 2008). Future learning spaces will provide greater flexibility and mobility of peo-

ple, knowledge, furniture and other artefacts (Beard & Wilson 2006: 80). In order to be efficient, future learning spaces should allow for multiple modes of instruction and learning (Neill & Etheridge 2008).

3. Implementation of the model – Case Concept Factory

The model presented above has been used as a base for a physical learning environment in the University of Vaasa. It is located in the University campus, within Western-Finland Design Centre, Muova. Even though it is understood that learning takes place everywhere, one specific learning environment was under construction. The aim was to create a “second living room” for students – a place formal enough for “business thinking”, efficiency and hard work, but informal enough to promote interaction, creativity and social capital.

Implementation has had a strong commitment from the faculty. Both time and budget resources have been allocated for developing the grounds of the learning environment as well as for implementing it. This development work started in 2007 and will continue at least till the end of 2010.

This learning environment is targeted to students attending a master’s level course in marketing called “Concept Factory”. This course requires 20 full time marketing students to work in teams of 3-4 students and solve authentic real-life development projects for companies. Examples of the projects include developing a new brand concept for renewed business concept, innovating new product ideas for energy consumption and creating new business models for recycling. Projects require self discipline, project management and team work skills, creativity as well as substance knowledge of different aspects of marketing. It runs for autumn term and it includes workshops, lectures, team specific coaching and customer meetings. Feedback from the previous year shows that students found the projects challenging, rewarding but time consuming.

The development was done in phases. First the pedagogical stances of experiential learning (Kolb 1984) was studied and tested in pilot course (yr 2007). However, it became soon evident that a special learning environment could be used to enhance the experiential learning as well as support the skills development (e.g. analytical, communication, presentation, project management and teamwork skills). The extensive literature on learning environments was studied and found out that not much research is done on user perspective. Thus, the user-centered approach was adopted and a study of meanings was conducted (Jaskari 2009). This study revealed the critical meaning dimensions that form the bases for learning environment as well. Next I describe how each dimension was used in the creation of the learning space.

Business and pleasure The space includes elements of both business and pleasure. Laptop computers, white boards, projectors are available for the students and enhance effectiveness. Researchers, project managers and designers working in Muova are seen all the time and they act partly as role models. Sofas, coffee machine and a small library are included to promote relaxation and socialization. All elements are movable from one place to another.

I and others The furniture is chosen so that it supports individual, small group and whole group working. Small working areas around the place give students the possibility to choose how they want to work. Social capital is enhanced by making coffee, painting mugs and taking care of the space together.

Peace and inspiration The elements of peace include the small library area, where quiet work is easy to manage. The sources of inspiration come from the other areas, as well as other learning environments, such as “Creative lab” which is the learning environment managed by Muova.

Safe and extraordinary The environment is targeted for the students. They are allowed to make it their own every year. The students should take the ownership of the place. However, it is extraordinary already as it is, compared to other university lecture rooms and working areas. Experiences of the extraordinary are also looked for in different environments, such as local world natural heritage area, creative lab and customer premises.

Some of the applications of the dimensions described above are similar year after year. Some of the applications can be altered creatively so that different kinds of experiences are promoted and the ownership of the space is given to students. The development of the space goes on. Next I turn into discussing some of the experiences, success factors and challenges that came our way.

4. Lessons learnt from experience – what works?

In our case we have promoted an environment where students would feel safe to creatively try new things and at the same time learn skills needed in the future. The course emphasises creative project and team work as well as deep cooperation with different business partners. It thus acts as a bridge between university and future working life. It enables the transfer of tacit knowledge; it gives role models and shows the desirable way of behaving. Still, it tolerates trial and error and gives the licence to make mistakes.

The assessment and the success of the learning environment are based on student feedback and the success of their studies. During the implementation of the learning environment the project works have been completed. This was not the case earlier. However, also the students are demanded to come to the meetings, which definitely supports completing the tasks. Student feedback has been positive; most criticism has been towards minor managerial issues such as time-tables and early meetings on Monday mornings.

The feedback collected clearly shows that the environment together with the project work and its process enhance such skills that are hoped for. Students aim at high level project work, they get motivated through the project, they act more and more mature towards the end of the course. In the beginning they are clearly students, towards the end they are more project managers. The social capital grows during the course. In the beginning most students sit quietly, but tend to be more talkative towards the end of the course.

However, the social capital and the ownership of the learning space are redesigned every time a new student group starts to work there. Thus the space should allow different learning, working and teaching styles to flourish. That is why the design of a learning space needs to maintain some flexibility over time.

From the teachers’ point of view, the informal guiding of students groups is easy in concrete place. This also encourages moving from using exams as evaluation method to more ongoing evaluation where long term learning is emphasized. However, teachers may fear the new

learning environment. In the old class room, the teacher had her place in front. In this kind of environment also teachers need to find their new place.

A new “second living room” –type of learning environment needs commitment from the students. Doing exercises and team work on sofas may promote new creative ideas. However, it can also turn against oneself. If the students only sit on the sofa and natter away, no intended learning cumulates. This is closely related to the matter of ownership of the place. The change from traditional lecturing to active project work is difficult for some students. They are not eager to take responsibility of the project at first. This phase is quite stressful for the teachers as well.

Even if the exploratory findings suggest that a space enhances creativity and efficiency, more research on the impact of existing and experimental spaces on learning is needed as also pointed out by Chism (2006). An existence of a physical learning environment is not to say that activities and process is not important. On the contrary, in order to develop skills required in the 21st century the learning objectives need to be well assessed. However, the place may have an important role in how well the skills are learnt. Together the place(s) and process form high quality teaching and learning.

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