

<p>Title AGENCY</p>
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<p>OVERVIEW</p> <p>The AGENCY project created a learning environment for students from the BSc Interactive Media and the BA Interactive Media Arts courses, which aimed to simulate a working environment that graduates aspired to work in as a course exit trajectory. The course team, alongside the students, designed a space which replicated a digital agency rather than a traditional teaching classroom. AGENCY was designed to be a mixed-use space, which helped staff engender active learning pedagogies, encouraged peer learning, and focused on student wellbeing.</p>
<p>Overview, Aims and Context (the rationale including underpinning pedagogy)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AGENCY designed and implemented a ‘vocational teaching space’ to address the needs of students, professions, industry and the wider community. • AGENCY addressed the need for shared responsibility in the classroom, evidenced by the flattening the traditional hierarchy of the classroom, staff working amongst the students on curriculum planning, consultancy projects and research. • This project is based on best professional practice, replicating how industry spaces and standards work, in-turn enhancing student employability
<p>Description</p> <p>Drawing on observations of best practice from visits with representatives from the FE sector to leading institutions across the UK (funded through Connected 3) and industry workplaces in London, Edinburgh, Birmingham, and Salford; the course team designed and developed a space, which simulated a digital agency.</p> <p>We used part of the funds to establish the space during Semester 3 2015-16, inviting the students to use the space during semester 1 2016-17 and then suggest additional equipment, events, interventions or resources that they thought could enhance the project aims. Taking the ethos from Maker Spaces and Hack Spaces, the project implemented a number of temporary physical and technological interventions in the space to prototype a new learning landscape in collaboration with students. These included technological interventions such as the use of ipads mirrored to large TV screens for sharing ideas and collaboration, student focused planning spaces with whiteboards and connected technologies to help focus on process rather than outcome and the</p>

introduction of plants, proven to increase happiness and productivity in work environment. We introduced controllable lighting and color through planters, parasols and soft furnishings; which are recurring themes and objects in creative industries work environments.

Design

The team used design-based methodologies to test interventions in the space, use taught sessions as spaces for critical reflection, and used feedback from the users (students) to help iterate the interventions over the semester. Students fed back informally through classroom discussions, through formal structured interviews and through written evaluation. We also structured tours of the learning landscape for University Stakeholders from the community, the FE and post-primary education sector, the third sector, the media and design industry and funding bodies such as InvestNI to create qualitative assessments of the space and help staff reflect on the process of design and implementation.

RESULTS

Findings and Conclusions:

The project has been important to help the course team restructure some of the module content to better meet the University Learning and Teaching Strategy, and has given staff the opportunity to reflect on, and implement active learning into modules. There has been a large increase in student attendance, and engagement within modules taught in the space and feedback from students is that it has been important in forming a course identity, which has positive implications for retention and attrition. The space has allowed staff to increase their community and civic contributions as it has given the course a discipline specific space to host events and undertake community engagement.

It has been important to students using the space that they have ownership over the day-to-day running of the space, flexibility in its use outside taught sessions, and wrap around access to the facilities. Students reflected on the openness and flexibility of the space compared to traditional computer labs which has helped increase peer-learning and team building. They found the space helped them to explore their ideas stating, “in here gives you the opportunity to expand your mind, and get your ideas across that you couldn’t in a computer lab.” This is a result of encouraging students to focus on process rather than outcome, learning rather than results and critical and reflective professional practice. They reported that the “openness of the space helps with the creative process” which we had hypothesized at the beginning of the project, that it would be important to create a space where students felt comfortable to move, discuss and reflect.

They reported that the space was “less stressful and intimidating” which helped them feel welcome, focused and is positive for student mental health and wellbeing. This was important to the project aims, but going forward this needs to be emphasized and built upon. It was important to students that the space had both recreational facilities as well

as learning resources. This helped to create an informal learning environment for students and a blended space, which reflects working practices outside of HE in the media sector.

The course has seen a large increase in applications since the spaces implementation and a large increase in first choice through the UCAS system

EVALUATION

Reflective Commentary

Based on qualitative data collected from students, the project has been successful in creating;

A cohort, and course identity for the students which has been proven to increase student retention and engagement

A space which values student contribution and engagement both through the design, but also the running of the space

A space which students feel is welcoming and reduces stress and anxiety about the creative process and assessment

An interface space for staff to engage with university stakeholder, community groups and research partners

A shared space for staff and students where students are encouraged to take ownership of the space and their learning

A space which is designed to encourage peer-learning and skills mapped to employability

A space with a very high room utilization percentage outside of scheduled sessions.

A more cohesive program, which has resulted in students involved in the project nominating staff for the UUSU Staff Team of the Year Award

The project was problematic in staff and students ability to take ownership of the space to implement the project and negotiate with IDS, Physical Resources and central departments. There were a number of large compromises that staff needed to take on the project due to lack of support from central departments to facilitate staff and student requests. It is very difficult to take any ownership of the spaces of the campus, test ideas and iterate processes. The work environments and professional patterns that we are simulating rely on their nimbleness, responsiveness to change and an ability to implement change quickly. Data collection on the project was difficult and time consuming, this was a useful prototype but data collection needs to be 'baked in' to the project or automated to help evaluate the project impact and map the effectiveness of some of the outcomes.

Student Engagement (to be completed by the student partner):

The feedback from students to the AGENCY learning landscape project has been overwhelming positive. Students have reported an increase in their sense of belonging on the course, a feeling of safety and security in the space and an impact on their outputs and grades.

Learning Environment

The AGENCY space is “a safe and anxiety free space which is open to all 3 years of Interactive Media who can work, learn and grow together and help each other out.” (Year 2 Student)

“The room also provided us students with a comfortable environment (Beanbags, smell diffuser and games consoles) so when we became stressed or unproductive we could take time out and relax within our own safe area.” (Year 3 Student)

“It felt like a safe and secure space to use our creative skills and produce the best work we could.” (Year 3 Student)

“It has helped form group relationships and encouraged creativity. It's one of the few stress-free environments on campus.” (Year 3 Student)

The AGENCY is “a sensual learning experience, scent and visuals, that improves creativity or de-stress' in relation to the time of the semester.” (Year 3 Student)

Informal Learning, Peer support and Belonging

The AGENCY space “encourages group work and collaboration with huddle spaces.” (Year 3 Student)

The DVD and Game libraries (and the devices to play them on) available in the AGENCY “brought students closer together as it provides students with something to have in common outside of things taught within the course. This has also evolved into student movie nights held within the AGENCY where it is a relaxed environment where students come together and watch a film and work together on current modules.” (Year 2 Student)

“The room acted as a meeting point where our problems could be resolved within a safe and comfortable environment. The team have also worked hard together to create a community within the course. From first years to final years we have all become one community and one working team. Even though this is my final year, I have never felt this kind of belonging in a teaching environment.” (Year 3 Student)

Impact on Learning Experience

“The AGENCY space has had great impact on student grades. In the AGENCY space, I personally feel that I spend more time focusing on my work and researching ideas in a warm and secure environment.” (Year 2 Student)

“This room has played a major factor in why I have had my most successful year of results in university thus far.” (Year 3 Student)

“The space for me offers an alternative to the sometimes daunting Library. I find myself coming into the university to do more work because of this space.” (Year 3 Student)

Learning Environment and Engagement: your views on the appropriateness and effectiveness of physical spaces for engagement and virtual spaces to enhance learning.

Effective use of new physical spaces needs time for both staff and students to adjust to. In the AGENCY we deliberately flattened the hierarchy of the space to engage students in their own learning which required a major rethink in the way staff teach and a change in expectation from students to be more active in their learning.

The space that was developed through the project increased students engagement, attendance and peer learning both inside the classroom, and contact hours, but more importantly for the course, outside of structured study. The space helped to raise the profile of the program and increase student NSS results.

Impact

The project has helped staff create assessments which encourage peer-learning and students ownership over the learning process. This has helped to increase the student performance in the course with an increase in student grades across the program.

The project helped to deliver the Project Social community work, linked to Science Shop which has seen the students engage more deeply in the professional contexts that they work within and increase student attainment on the module.

The space is also used as a showcase during open days for the course which has seen an increase in applications, and a dramatic increase in CF conversion (+111.76%) which was a key target for the program.

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

Transferability

Throughout the project, we have facilitated a number of tours and talks with staff from other faculties who are keen to rethink the design of their learning spaces and reconsider the delivery of taught session, especially in the STEM subjects. We have taught sessions across disciplines in the space, collaborating with disciplines such as English on project. The project has high transferability across disciplines to encourage active learning and peer-learning.

It is important however that this project was designed to replicate practices from other disciplines in creating vocation learning spaces which simulated work environments that students aspired to work within; for instance laboratories for Biomedical Sciences, Field Work for Environmental Scientists, TV studios for Media Studies students etc.

Dissemination (internal and external)

The space was co-developed and received fantastic feedback from industry partners and stakeholders from *InnovateUK*, *The BBC*, *Ulster University Council*, [Flyte.ie](http://flyte.ie), *InvestNI*, *NIScreen*, *Ball&Wolf*, *Cleancut Pixel*, *Heart & Head*, *Mammoth*, *Makematic*, *Causeway Coast and Glens Council*, *Create Future*, *Future Cities Catapult*, and *PWC*. The space has proven its flexibility by hosting events for *All SySTEMs Go*, *The Ulster Onionist* <http://www.ulsteronionist.co.uk> and has been a community interface space for stakeholders as clients on *Project Social* <http://www.project-social.co.uk>

We have run a number of faculty events inside the space for external stakeholders such as the Performing The Drone workshop, and Consultancy and Civic Engagement work with schools and businesses.

There is a paper accepted for the Journal of Media Practice based on the project, and the underpinning research has been presented at CHERP 2015.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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