



What way do I
enjoy working
the most?

Above: image from 'Self' (2016)

Learning Places: supporting learning through places and pedagogies that promote belonging, inclusion and equity

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INTRODUCTION

Overview:

The facilitation of high quality learning is dependent on our understanding of and responsiveness to how our students utilise the learning spaces and resources within the university. The 'Learning Places' project sought to inform this discourse by testing the impact of learning activities and space design on the student learning experience.

Aims:

To investigate the role of the learner as an active agent in their learning experience: their requirements, expectations and goals.

To progressively embed technology into learning and teaching spaces through adoption of mobile, connected, support and visual and interactive learning.

To examine the role of the teacher versus an expert facilitator of learning (Race, 2011).

To assess the role of learning spaces and the contexts in which learning happens: discussion of elements, construction, structure and impact.

To ensure inclusivity and equality for all learners.

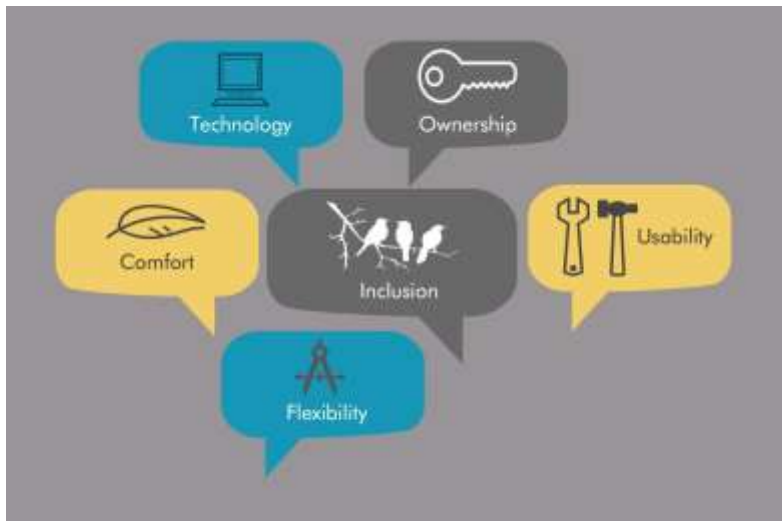
To contribute to current sector discourses and ensure Ulster takes an active, informed approach to the integration of space, facilities and resources to support all learners.

Description:

Technological advancements have made possible hybrid models of interactive learning; promoting access, collaboration, sustainability and global awareness. As educationalists the learning spaces we create for our students need not be bound by physical or time constraints. How we shape, re-shape, use and re-use spaces can be transformative to the students learning experience.

Our professional challenge is to build a sense of belonging and community among students. Space becomes place as when endowed with value (Yi-Fu Tuan, 2001). The construction of learning places that foster high-quality learning through inclusivity and equity of all learners is dependent upon our understanding of and responsiveness to how students use such places. Assessing the elements, structure and impact of those places (physical and/or digital) through discussion with both staff and students will inform and inspire the pedagogies of the future.

The 'Learning Places' project included the design and fit of a pilot classroom, influenced by the SCALE-UP (Student Centred Active Learning Environment with Upside-down Pedagogies) approach to delivering large group teaching. The classroom was primarily used by students in their first year of HE study within Belfast School of Art during the 2015/16 academic year. Prior to this (September 2015) the space and approaches were piloted during a Summer School to observe how smaller numbers navigated the space and its resources (see Appendix A).



The key consideration for ‘Learning Places’ was to create an inclusive environment for the 2015/16 cohort of students (n=90). Within this cohort, students (n=12) had declared specific learning needs (hearing impairment, dyslexia, diagnosed on autistic spectrum and mental health issues) and others had health issues that would impede their attendance at sessions (n=4). For some English was not their first language (n=3). Note: this is not irregular to have this mix of students with differing needs and would be comparable with the preceding four years of student groups. In addition, the levels of prior subject knowledge varied greatly across the cohort so it was vital to devise teaching strategies that would suitably engage all learners.

The ‘Learning Places’ project sought to examine how the integration of physical and digital learning spaces, teaching approaches and resources engaged students and impacted upon their confidence and competence in subject knowledge.

Design:

Elements of two separate modules, delivered across semester one and two, were re-designed. The physical space layout adopted elements of the ‘flipped classroom’ approach. In tandem digital learning spaces were created which included the use of a variety of digital platforms - Twitter, Padlet, Storify, Powtoon, WeVideo and Facebook.

At the start of the academic year I conducted an online questionnaire with the cohort to assess aspects of their digital literacy and establish a baseline (n = 71 out of 89 responded). The survey results provided a clear overview of the students’ perceptions of their digital skills and any where they felt they needed additional training (see Appendix B). From this data I was able to ensure that my teaching approaches and delivery of the module content was appropriate. This data proved fundamental in my planning as my prior assumptions were that a greater percentage of students would have high levels of digital literacy, which turned out not to be the case. It was therefore very important that the learning activities not only developed students subject knowledge and core study skills but their digital literacy also. Further student self-evaluations completed in week 3 and week 8 of semester one afforded the student group time to reflect and identify what key digital skills they felt they needed to develop. Additional workshops were put in place to support these needs. In semester two I promoted the JISC Digital Experience Student Survey to the group. The results and the comparison to the UK sector responses can be read in **Appendix B**.

A number of group and individual activities where designed to encourage new forms of discussion and interaction. It is important to note that I considered a fundamental value throughout the project design, activities and evaluation was to establish and encourage collegiate working practices, respect for others opinions and openness to challenge. The development of a 'safe' space in which to discuss and respect all views was established with the group from the start through discussion and affirmation throughout the module delivery. These activities aimed to ensure all felt comfortable yet intellectually challenged in the sessions.

Time was also an important factor. The approach adopted encouraged discussions to be initiated and developed both inside and outside of the scheduled sessions, affording time for all students to consider materials and resources. The students themselves also played an important role in the development of the discussions and where given tasks to develop the structure of sessions etc. Both staff (n=1) and students (n=90) made photographic and in some cases short digital films to articulate their experiences of learning in the space. Subsequent discursive activities included student-led edited compilations of their experiences in a print publication (see Appendix C), online evaluations of teaching and learning, student focus group sessions and the development of assessment literacy (see Appendix D for some examples of activities). The project highlighted the role of the learner as an active agent in their learning experience and considered the role of the teacher as an expert facilitator of learning (Race, 2011).



Above L to R: POST-ITS depicting week one semester one reflections on HE experience; 'I CAN' a team illustration completed in week eleven semester one reflecting HE experience.

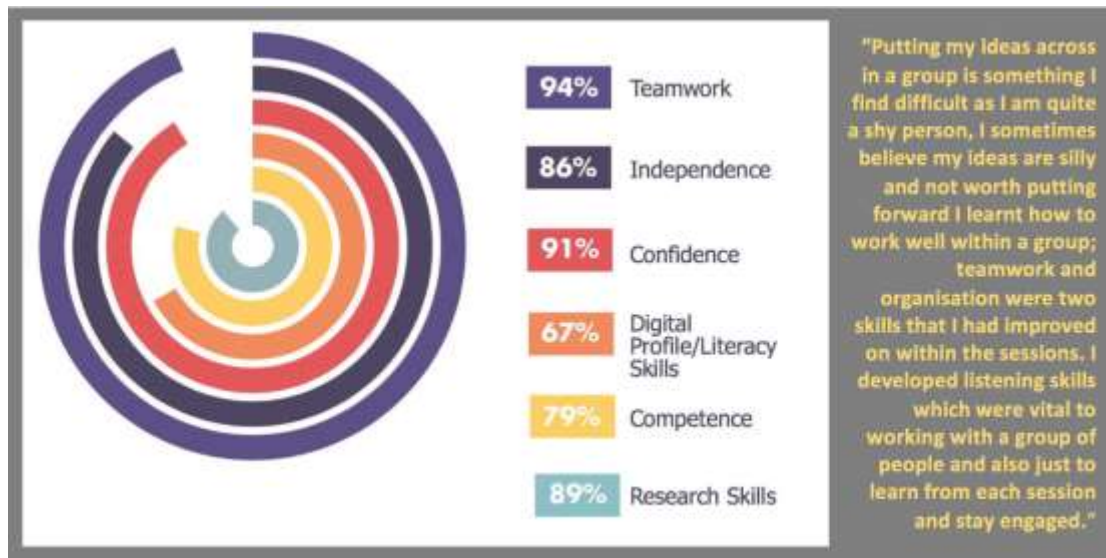
RESULTS

Findings and Conclusions:

The use of both discursive and non-discursive learning activities that engaged students in familiar and unfamiliar ways with content material was particularly effective. We may experience a student cohort that is increasingly technologically literate but this should not however be mistaken for digitally literacy. Many admit to gaps in their skills and those who consider themselves technologically fluent accept that their evaluation and interaction with complex content and knowledge in online environments is not necessarily well developed. I found the JISC digital literacy framework really informative and useful in

developing this work. Another important aspect of the project was to introduce professional practice and readiness for operating in the public realm, so as part of the project activities we discussed how to build your professional profile or identity online.

The key theme that emerged from the student responses was that they felt valued. The impact of their involvement in the project has been noted as of significance as by being able to express their views they felt that their opinion mattered, anxiety was reduced and self-efficacy increased. Overall the findings would support Boud and Falchikov assertion that student emotions may directly affect their cognitive processing (2007). When students are given the opportunity to work and learn together, they experience concepts or ideas from a perspective outside of their own. Collaboration was highlighted by both staff and students as having had impact on their learning. Staff noted an increased engagement across programme modules and a strong sense of group cohesion. Students expressed that they felt genuinely included and valued; being part of a community. The illustration below summarises the key areas that students felt they had improved on most throughout the project.



The findings would also support the view that current and future students will demand greater engagement with their peers, staff, programme content, and institutional physical and digital resources. The construction of learning environments that foster high quality learning through inclusivity and equity of all learners is dependent upon understanding and responsiveness to how students use such places. Assessing the elements, structure and impact of those places, be they digital and/or physical, through discussion with both staff and students can inform future pedagogies.

The main conclusions are:

- The student experience is central and they should be engaged as active participants in their learning.

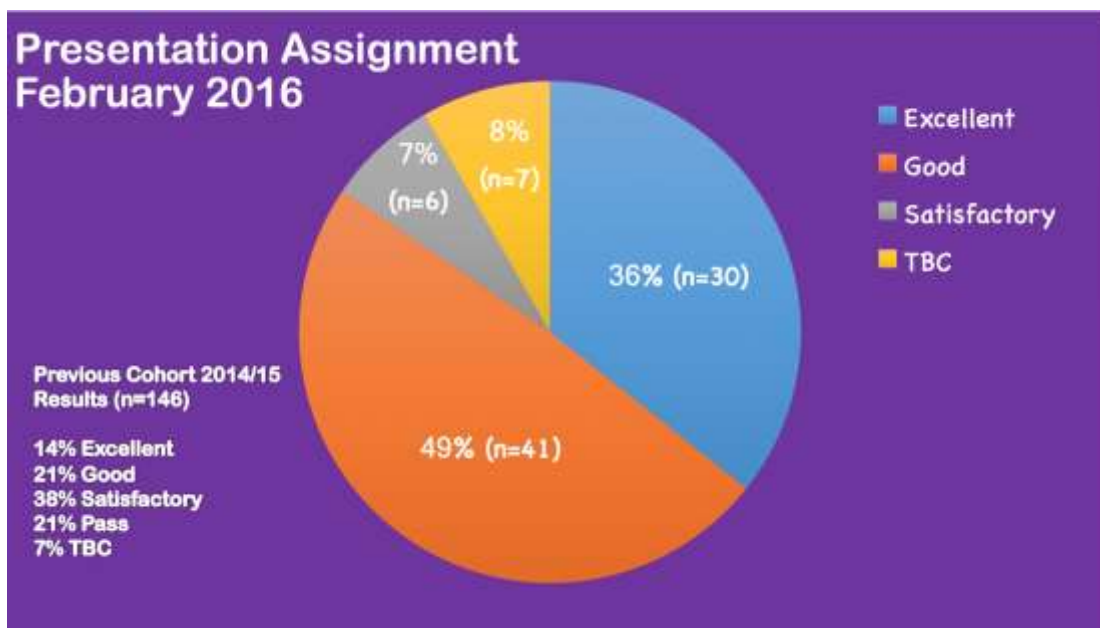
- The successful integration of technology, space design and multi-modal learning experiences should be commonplace.

- The impact of these developments can be significant if Higher Education is to achieve a sustainable and cohesive learning community for the future.

EVALUATION

Reflective Commentary:

Attendance throughout the sessions was high, coupled with high levels of active engagement in online activities had a direct impact on student performance in assessments. The diagram below illustrates the improved performance on an assignment task in comparison to the previous years cohort.



The key challenges that emerged throughout the project were:

- Unreliable Wifi access in the pilot classroom, possibly as a result of a high volume of students carrying multiple devices.
- While the engagement and attendance throughout the sessions was high, there was still a number of students who did not actively engage (n \cong 6 to 10: interchangeable each week).

Student Engagement:

Please see the following links to view some of the work created by the students throughout the duration of the project <http://www.re-enactonline.com/fouweds-sessions/>

Learning Environment and Engagement:

Spaces, teaching approaches, facilities and resources that support student learning were re-evaluated; the results informed the implementation of a number of teaching practices, which in turn have had a strongly positive impact on the students learning experience.

Impact:

Using technology, educational methods and enquiry-based learning (individual and group) to engage students in learning activities has resulted in a positive learning experience for the student group.

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

Transferability:

Students as partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of teaching approaches, technology and physical spaces will enhance the development of a sustainable L&T strategy for Ulster and positively impact upon the students learning experience.

Dissemination:

- Paper presentation 'Learning Places: using Photovoice to inform the future design, construction and use of learning environments in Higher Education'. In: British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Leeds, UK.
- Poster presentation with augmented reality 'Informing the future design of spaces and pedagogies that promote belonging, inclusion and equity in Higher Education learning environments' (augmented reality enhanced presentation). In: British Council 'Going Global' Conference, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Paper presentation 'The 'Learning Places' project: supporting learning through places and pedagogies, which promote belonging, inclusion and equity'. In: 'Inspire – sharing great practice in Arts and Humanities teaching and learning', Higher Education Academy Arts and Humanities Annual Conference, Brighton, UK.
- Paper presentation 'Learning places: constructing sustainable active learning environments'. In: CHERP Annual Conference, Ulster University, Coleraine, UK.



SUPPORTING INFORMATION

References:

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Attachments List:

- Appendix A – Engage Summer School
- Appendix B – Digital Literacy Survey Results
- Appendix C – 'Self' Book
- Appendix D – Assessment Literacy Activities