

## A Long-Term View for Learning Spaces

*The following excerpt is based on a round-table conversation/interview conducted by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer, at the EDUCAUSE 2008 Annual Conference. To listen to the full podcast, go to <<http://connect.educause.edu/blog/gbayne/e08podcastinversa/47781>>.*

**Gerry Bayne:** What are some of the traditional assumptions about learning spaces that you would like to challenge?

**Joan K. Lippincott:** I'd like to challenge the notion that brand-new, beautiful learning spaces in and of themselves can change learning. I believe that it has to be a combination of the space and the pedagogy and the technology.

**Clare C. van den Blink:** The physical spaces offer an ambience, but if they are not convenient, if they are not on the right place on campus, then they play a lesser role. Proximity on campus is crucial. This is not to say that there aren't some physical spaces that foster collaboration better than others, but it is too simplistic to say that a beautiful table set up in a beautiful new space will magically solve all our teaching problems.

**Bayne:** What is the relation of space to learning? Is there a correlation?

**van den Blink:** One of the interesting things about the use of space is how technology facilitates the ability to combine the physical space with the virtual space. We have some new classroom facilities at Cornell with an interactive video grid that allows eight to ten different locations to be brought in to the space. The way that the

room is designed is to make occupants feel inclusive, as if they are part of that virtual space.

**Martin Lewis:** I speak as the proud owner of a beautiful new learning space. I quite agree that it is not enough to simply build the space by itself. Designers have to be engaged with the pedagogy and the learning and teaching development in the institution. The new facility that we have is open 24x7. We had only one opportunity to see the students come in and kind of flow in to these spaces that we had designed to the best of our ability. We discovered that they did exactly the things we were predicting they would do. They worked collaboratively in the collaborative spaces, they studied quietly in the quiet spaces, and so on. We tend to think about learning spaces in a sort of spatial way, but there is also a sense in which the requirement for the use varies through time as well through the academic year. We've already discovered that we are having to change our minds about the use of certain spaces at certain times.

**Crit Stuart:** One of the problems that we box ourselves into when we create learning spaces is that these become statements to a kind of perfection. In fact, we can never achieve perfection in a space. We should be creating a space as the beginning of a large experiment, and then, as individuals use the space and as different pressures are placed on that space for learning needs, the space needs to conform. It should be malleable; it should be easily transformable. Ultimately, the spaces we deliver are controlled by the people who occupy them. The spaces

should be able to carry that heterogeneous mix of needs so that we're not creating one space for one purpose and the next space for another, discrete purpose. Ideally, the spaces that we create will be able to carry many functions, depending on what the occupants need.

**Bayne:** You talk about designing learning spaces for students. What kind of questions do you ask students? How do you gather information?

**Stuart:** There are many ways to get student-centered information. A simple technique is to go to spaces on campus where students congregate to study. One can learn a lot just by asking students a few questions: Is this your preferred study location on campus? How often do you come here? What is it about the space that brings you here? What sorts of assistance do you require when studying, and do you find it here? What comments do you have about the aesthetics, furnishings, technology, and refreshment found here? Then one might end by asking why the students aren't studying in the library (which reflects my interest) and how the library would need to change to get them there. A few dozen interviews would provide data that begins to give insight into students' preferences for learning spaces.

**Lippincott:** It is also important not to leave out faculty. Rather than doing a broad faculty survey, we should try to identify the faculty who are the leaders in the use of technology in teaching and learning and ask them what they would do if they had different spaces. What kinds of support do they need, both for themselves and for

their students, to achieve their pedagogical goals?

**van den Blink:** I agree with Joan and Crit about asking the questions of students and faculty, but we should also involve librarians and IT support staff. We need a more holistic view. One of the interesting things that we have used as a data point at Cornell is the operators who staff our instructional and other labs. In addition to all our surveys, we ask them to track their usage and their observations. What happens in September is very different from what happens in December. This richer set of



data provides a long view of how the space is being used and also a good cross-section of everyone who touches that space.

**Lauren Brady Oswald:** I've very recently become a full-time staff member. I worked with our educational technology department as a student intern, doing learning space design. As far as gathering information from students, I was an "undercover student": I would spend time in the space and sit in with classes. We found it easier to give students examples of possibilities—to build small-scale sample spaces or get furniture samples—instead of just free-form dreaming. Because it was more work for them to come up with those new ideas than it was for them to say, "Oh, I don't like this chair because . . ."

**Lewis:** The development of the evidence base for the design of new learning spaces can be problematic in terms of the timeframes involved. With small-scale refurbishment projects—for example, reconfiguring an area of an existing library—it may make a good deal of sense to have some kind of broadly linear process for gathering the evidence and talking to students and finding out what they want or what they don't like about the current space. But with larger buildings, the lead time tends to be a good bit longer. In fact, when we talk about the information commons at Sheffield, we stress the point that we had

to make some inspired guesses. The discussions that led to the funding for the building took place quite a long time before we developed some of our current thinking on pedagogy and learning within the institution.

**Bayne:** How does an institution balance design concepts and design cost?

**van den Blink:** I see them as very closely aligned to the institutional strategic goals because we are always having to make

choices and tradeoffs in our decisions. When we look at the concepts and costs and try to align them, the strategic goals of an institution really are the drivers, because ultimately, we can't do everything that we want to do. There are limits. So, looking carefully at where our institution already is, what is in place, what is being accomplished, and what the goals are is a natural driver of the next step.

**Lewis:** The trend of the last decade has certainly been to reduce the amount of contact time between faculty and students. The agencies that are responsible for campus learning spaces, for independent learning spaces, need to keep reminding colleges and universities that students spend more time outside of formal class-

rooms or laboratories than they do inside. We are responsible for providing the spaces where that independent learning and collaborative learning happens. There is a very good alignment between corporate goals, in terms of educational quality and educational outcomes, and the investments that we make in the student learning experience. We are starting to understand that there needs to be a continuous revenue investment in modern learning spaces if they are to stay fit for their intended purpose. We can't build them and then walk away. We have to be prepared to come back with some kind of regular reinvestment program.

**Bayne:** Regarding investment in learning spaces, I've heard the saying: "It's not like buying a beer. It's like buying a puppy!"

**van den Blink:** You hit the nail on the head. We can't think of any space use on campus as start-finish or done; rather, we must take the long-term view of continually reviewing a learning space over time. Again, this wraps around to not forgetting the goals of the institution. We need to make sure that our beautiful new spaces continue to meet those goals over time. That often gets forgotten after the excitement of the ribbon-cutting is over and we move on to the next project of priority.

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