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All change: switching tracks to Learning Zone 2.0

Regina Everitt

Nearly four years ago, the University of the Arts London launched its first flexible learning space for students, called the Learning Zone. The service model for the space was underpinned by an ethos of peer support. When London's Crossrail Development project necessitated relocation, the Learning Zone team had to build the service all over again. Learning Zone 2.0 was a chance to reflect on the use and design of the space ... and to improve on the first version. Despite personnel changes, building delays and lost furniture and equipment, the new space opened in May 2010.

The vision

University of the Arts London is one of Europe's largest universities for arts, design and communication, with more than 20,000 students from Further Education through to PhD level. It comprises six internationally renowned colleges: Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, Chelsea College of Art and Design, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion and Wimbledon College of Art. Awarded university status in 2004, the individual colleges retain their distinctive identities, while benefitting from shared resources and services that seek to combine the art school atmosphere with the university experience.

The achievement of university status prompted a change in student expectations as students said that, although they identified with their 'College' communities, they also wanted to feel part of the 'University' community, with opportunities to network and collaborate with students across colleges. A significant outcome from consultations with students was the Student Hub, a collection of student-focused services co-located at a single site in Central London.

The Student Hub offers modern, spacious and informal spaces where students across the University can study, relax and network. Opened in October 2006, the space design, ethos and management are the result of a successful

collaboration between the Students' Union and the University. An integral part of the Student Hub is the Learning Zone.

Part of Information Services, the Learning Zone is a flexible learning environment that combines state-of-the-art technology with information resources and a low-tech artwork preparation area. It supports curriculum requirements across the six colleges, stocking key texts alongside a range of applications and assistive technologies. Students are empowered to take control of their own learning by re-configuring furniture to accommodate group or individual study. Assistance is never far away, with front-line support provided by a roving staff of current students/recent graduates as well as more senior learning support staff. The Learning Zone is open during term time from 10 am to 11 pm, Monday to Saturday, and from noon until 6 pm on Sunday. Outside the BA term-time schedule, the space is open from 10 am to 6 pm, Monday to Friday.

The making of Learning Zone 1.0

Although inspired by the design and ethos of the Learning Grid at Warwick University,¹ we wanted to design a space that suited the specific needs of art and design students. We had to scale down our aspirations to fit into existing estates and a limited budget. The 65 Davies Street site, home of the

University administrative services and staff, was chosen for Learning Zone 1.0 as it was the most neutral location available and was fairly centrally located in a bustling shopping street. Of course the 'fine print' about the chosen location read as follows:

- 1) London College of Fashion held lectures in the Davies Street building which meant that these students comprised the majority of the users and
- 2) students from London College of Fashion and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design could access the site more easily than students at other sites as they were closer to it.

All the student-focussed services were to be located on the lower ground, ground and first floors; the Learning Zone was to be located on the first floor. Before work could begin on the planned spaces, existing services had to be re-located. This required careful negotiation between service managers and the Student Hub project team as some managers were concerned about the loss of precious space – gold dust in most London universities. Eventually, building works began in July 2006 with a view to opening the Student Hub and associated services by the start of the BA term in October 2006.

Recruited to implement the vision of the Student Hub Project team, I began working on the project in September 2006. The designated 316 square metre

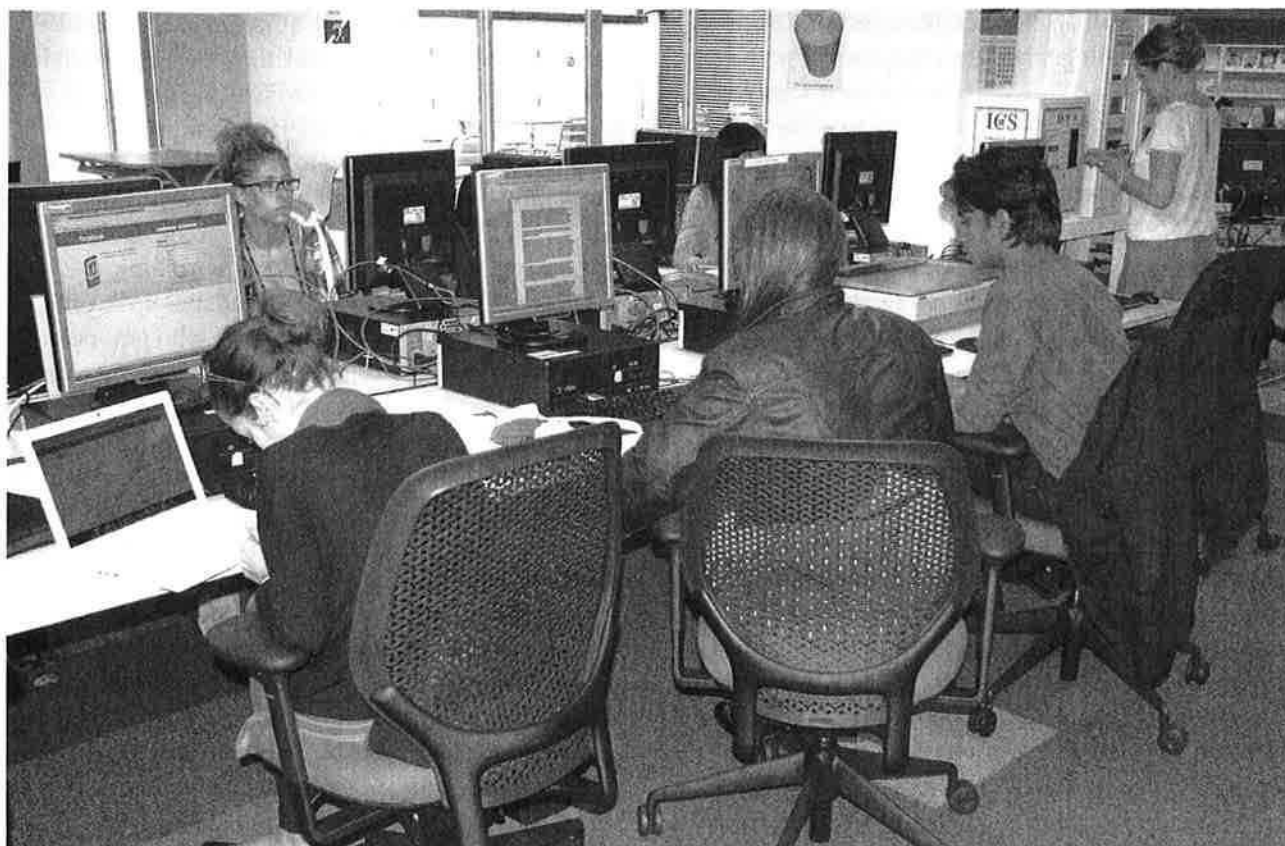
space was still a building site with some walls erected. Then the builders on site discovered asbestos, which put the project behind schedule. Although a few Learning Zone staff members had been recruited, many more were needed to accommodate the extended opening hours that were planned. Some equipment had been ordered though more was required. The new service had to be heavily promoted as nothing comparable existed anywhere else within the University. There was a lot to do to meet that October 2006 deadline.

To my advantage, Information Services is a well-run, centralised service with supportive staff members. Two Assistant Librarians helped me to recruit 10 student assistants. We did a lot of interviewing in a short period of time for which the Assistant Librarians received wine and chocolate in recompense. The newly-recruited Learning Zone staff members rose to the challenge as well, 'hot desking' across the University sites. We were nomads, checking in continuously at the developing site, chasing builders, tracking equipment deliveries that erroneously made the rounds across the six colleges and trying to meet and support one another through the period of disruption. As the heavy building work ended toward the end of September 2006 and we began moving in our expensive equipment, we had to keep reminding the remaining



Group study in Learning Zone 1.0.

Photo: David Bracegirdle, Learning Zone Manager.



Individual work in Learning Zone 2.0.

Photo: David Bracegirdle, Learning Zone Manager.

decorators to lock the doors when they went on their tea breaks as we were concerned that iMacs, Macbooks, etc. might sprout legs!

We did open on the first day of the BA term in October 2006 as planned. We opted for a soft launch as some furniture and equipment still had not arrived. (The Students' Union loaned us tables.) Wifi was not yet working. And we created interim (perhaps amateurish) publicity materials as we did not want to promise services we could not yet deliver. Our t-shirts identifying the front-line student assistants had arrived and created a welcome sight for users unsure what the space was about. By mid-October, the new furniture and equipment had arrived; we confidently created more glossy publicity materials, promoted a series of programmes about the services on offer, and observed as innovative collaborations between students developed organically, aided by the flexible design of the space.

What worked and did not work – Learning Zone 1.0

Some students got it right away. Noting that most of the furniture was on castors, they reconfigured the

space to meet their group or individual needs without prompting. They got comfy (and at times fell asleep) on the soft sofas and stools. They made full use of the floor as well as the tables. They embraced the lending of laptops and other equipment. They (generally) respected the space, putting their rubbish in one of the many rubbish bins located around them, and self-regulated noise levels. They used the whiteboards, web forms and suggestion boxes to tell us what other equipment or services they wanted. In fact, their feedback led to an increase in fixed and flexible work spaces, the addition of scanners and printers, and reconfiguration of book shelving. And the space was better for it.

After living in the space for a term, some of the design from the architects and Student Hub project team had to be modified. One of the bookshelves was replaced by a row of fixed workstations. There was no locked storage for consumables, so we added units under the printer and low-tech benching. The lights for the multimedia presentation areas (called pods) were connected to the main space lights. So, if students wanted to switch off the lights to view a film, for example, they would cast part of the main space into darkness; this had to be disconnected. The 14-square-metre staff office, which

accommodated all 16 staff members over all shifts, was also the lending office for equipment. As the lending service increased in popularity, it was impossible to work in the cramped space. So we created a small lending office in another location within the main space. (This required keen negotiation with my Director who was concerned about the loss of student space.) The main space was not compromised; in fact, the new lending office enabled us to expand the lending service.

Other changes were needed that would have required more extensive building work. The two multimedia pods were designed without a ceiling (a design feature) so sound travelled into the main space. They were also positioned in a way that created blind spots on the CCTV footage. The remaining oak book shelves were floor to ceiling, rendering the extreme upper and lower shelves useless. Finally, the Learning Zone, a lively, dynamic space, was located just down the hall from services that required a bit of discretion, such as counselling and student finance. It was not ideal that students seeking support from these services and who might be in distress should have to encounter their peers.

The opportunity to modify these issues came in Summer 2009 when it was confirmed that we would need to vacate Davies Street by Spring 2010 due to the Crossrail development project.² We had been warned in 2006 that we would all be asked to leave the building eventually. Though we knew that we were in a 'temporary' location, we planned and operated as if we were in permanent lodgings. Nearly four years later, we had the opportunity to re-think the Learning Zone! Having started work this way, the Learning Zone team were well-versed in dealing with change and were generally unfazed about doing it all again. But the rules would change.

The making of Learning Zone 2.0

The new location for the Student Hub and other Central Services is 272 High Holborn. The Learning Zone 2.0 shares an open-plan space with the University career service, employment agency, and enterprise consultancy. This co-location provides great opportunity for collaborations, which the services have successfully offered in the past. However, there were a number of challenges. Although our muse, the Learning Grid at the University of Warwick, offers drop-in locations for similar services within its social learning spaces, it does so in a space roughly three times larger than that allocated for LZ 2.0 and partners. The new open-plan space is the primary work area for careers

and other staff. They work adjacent to a dynamic student-focussed service that allows eating, drinking, talking on mobile phones and use of multimedia without headphones. All services lost precious square metres, which meant that they needed to re-think how they used and potentially could share space. Finally, each service has different models: one service supports current students with limited assistance for alumni; another students up to one year after graduation; a third those who graduated up to two years earlier; and another those who did so up to three years previously.

The challenges for staff were daunting, but there was tremendous goodwill amongst team members. We were confident that design solutions could be found to make the space work. For example, screens on castors could be used for impromptu space delineation. We explored the idea of shades from the ceiling, but the elevation is too low to accommodate them. As the space is in the lower ground floor, with limited light from a terraced area, glass is used for delineation where possible to maximise the light.

During planning, we visited such student centres and flexible spaces as King's College London, University of Brighton, University of Glasgow and University of Reading for design inspiration. We had previously visited the Saltire Centre at Glasgow Caledonian and, of course, the Learning Grid at University of Warwick. We had frequent meetings between the architects, surveyors and stakeholder service managers during planning. We also had a workshop with all staff members across services to openly discuss concerns, recommend solutions and to agree ground rules for initial operations prior to opening. We received support from our Human Resources department about best practice for open-plan workspaces.

Although project planning operated smoothly, barring a few heated discussions about perceived 'space creep' by one service or the other, the project was affected by personnel changes. But once again, goodwill and team work amongst staff members has enabled the project to stay on track.

Learning Zone 2.0 finally opened during the first week of May, slightly later than planned due to some delays in building works and arrival of furniture from storage. (Once again, some furniture took a tour of other college sites before finally arriving at the Learning Zone.) As with Learning Zone 1.0, there was a soft launch as stored and new equipment and furniture arrived. Work on promotional material has gathered pace. As the new location is farther away from the bustle and draw of Oxford Street, staff will need to work hard once again to provide programmes and services that will

draw students from other sites. Of course, the closer proximity to Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design could mean an increase in student use from that site. And the late and week-end opening of the Learning Zone will continue to be key selling points.

What seems to work, what doesn't – Learning Zone 2.0

The busy Autumn term will be the benchmark for how well the new space is received. There are, however, a number of improvements resulting from lessons learned from LZ 1.0. The presentation suites are larger and fully enclosed, so there is no more sound bleed. The suites can also be used to deliver tutorials and other programmes. There is an outdoor terrace with tables and chairs, so users have more choice of spaces in which to work. The flooring of the artwork preparation area (cutting, pasting, glue spraying, etc.) is tiled rather than carpeted for easier cleaning. Enclosed, lockable storage for consumables has been built in. There are still some snagging issues to tackle, but students have already started returning to the space in good numbers. And with the surgeries on design applications and other activities happening at the career services, the space has its familiar creative buzz.

There are some early indications of areas to re-think. An awning would be a good addition to the terrace area to provide shelter from sun and rain. And the staffing spaces within the space need better insulation from residual noise. As with Learning Zone 1.0, 'living' in the space will be the best way to determine what works and what doesn't.

Next destination...

I have since moved on to manage a larger library at London College of Communication, which offers a range of 'learning zones' that follow Learning Zone best practice. A member of the Learning Zone team has progressed to manage the new space and will take the space to its next destination.

Wherever that next destination for the Learning Zone may be, its success will not be measured solely by the space it inhabits, but by the ethos of the space as exemplified by its staff.

References

1. Rachel Edwards, 'The Learning Grid at the University of Warwick: a library innovation to support learning in higher education,' *SCONUL Focus* 38 (2006): 4-7.
2. Crossrail is the project to build a new high-frequency railway for London and the Southeast. The University of the Arts building at 65 Davies St has been demolished.

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