A Learning Strategy for the Lower Commons
Cowles Library

Working Document 1-24-2012, 2-26-2012. mwd

Strategy

The Library will improve the student learning experience by providing a supportive environment intended to catalyze social interaction, support integrative behaviors and support collaboration. This environment will use proven social learning design elements to contribute to student academic success and personal growth.

Background

Originating in social-constructivist views of learning, an increased focus on social learning space emerged in educational facilities design in response to ubiquitous technology, changing pedagogies and professional/programmatic expectations.[1]

Social learning spaces are variously defined:

Jane Hart, who works primarily in virtual learning spaces, offers a fairly pedestrian description: *"a place where individuals can work and learn together collaboratively (both formally and informally) with others - in course groups, study groups or in project and team spaces."*[2]

Chris Rust quotes this definition, *"a physical and/or virtual area that is not predominantly identified with either social or work/study perspectives but transcends both and facilitates both formal and informal student centered collaborative learning,"* and further describes them as

> *"Spaces that combine: social activities (e.g. eating and drinking, getting to know people, staying in touch with people, hanging out in groups); learning (e.g. studying with others, group project work, meeting with advisors) and technology (e.g. writing, editing, printing, on-line research, e-mail, on-line discussion, on-line workshops/collaboration, socialising on-line and perhaps even playing games)."*[3]

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[1] Chris Rust, writing for a symposium on *Re-designing Universities: Social Learning Space* at http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/rsw/undergrad/cetl/news/symposium/

[2] http://janeknight.typepad.com/socialmedia/2009/10/intro-to-social-learning-environments-a-social-learning-resource.html

[3] Rust, *Re-designing Universities: Social Learning Space.*

In contrast to class labs, classrooms and computer user rooms, the broader notion of learning spaces, and particularly of social learning spaces, de-emphasizes formality and structure in favor of the space's human elements:

> "*Learning spaces are not mere containers for a few, approved activities; instead, they provide environments for people. Factors such as the availability of food and drink, comfortable chairs, and furniture that supports a variety of learning activities are emerging as critical in the design of learning spaces . . .*"[4]

Social learning spaces contribute to student success:

> "*Spaces that catalyze social interaction significantly contribute to the personal and professional growth of students and their orientation within disciplinary studies,*"[5] and reflect a growing emphasis on teamwork, group social skills and collaboration both inside and outside the academy.

Context

The Lower Commons space is one component of a larger learning spaces design planning concept for Cowles Library. This particular space is designed as a social learning space supporting informal group work and individual study in a social setting.

This space does not directly provide technology tools, classrooms, concentrate academic support services or support formal collaborative activities such as presentation practice. These activities and services will be the focus of the second phase of the renovation ("Upper Commons") extending throughout the remainder of the first floor.

This area facilitates a transition to classical, individual study spaces in the second floor Reading Room and Atrium. Renovation projects on the second floor will include a focus on creating and maintaining technology-enabled, very high quality individual study and learning spaces in more traditional library configurations.

Application

The Library will improve the student learning experience by providing a supportive environment intended to catalyze social interaction,

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[4] Brown, Malcolm. "Chapter 9: Learning Space Design, " in *Educause Learning Spaces*, http://www.educause.edu/learningspacesch9

[5] Oblinger, D.G. (2006) 'Space as a change agent' in (Ed) Diana G. Oblinger *Learning Spaces, USA: Educause* as cited in Greenwood, et, al. in a presentation titled, *A Colonisation Study of a Small Student Social Learning Space.* Slides at http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsld/bsle/conf07/greenwood.pdf

- Leverage the existing café space by providing additional amenities and extending operation into new time periods
- Remove formal learning space uses (classroom) from the area
- Emphasize comfort, amenities and safety as significant design considerations

support integrative behaviors[6]

- Insure that power and wireless connectivity are ubiquitous throughout the area.
- Allow students to transition from group to individual activity while remaining within the space
- Work surfaces should be associated with all seating
- A connection to the outside world (e.g., live television feed) should be supported
- Include elements that provide performance support [7]

and support collaboration.

- Focus on small group seating (e.g. 4 to 5)
- Permit furnishings to be easily moved and reconfigured by occupants
- Provide useful tools to support collaborative activities.

This environment will contribute to student academic success and personal growth.

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[6] *Integrative behaviors* describe students' combining multiple activities (eating, socializing, studying, technology) simultaneously or sequentially in the same space.

[7] *Performance support* delivers "valued assistance" [Allison Rossett]. Common types of performance support include quick reference guides and tip sheets, electronic repositories of performance support information (procedures), forums & discussion groups, expert locator tools, and learning portals. Examples of performance support components for this space might include signage pointing to key library resources (web site, research guides, library help), resource discovery displays, and "handouts" for academic activities or support services in the area.