

HOW DO STUDENTS ENGAGE WITH LEARNING?
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IN AT THE DEEP END

This paper proposal is very much a “work in progress”. In the autumn of 2005, funds were made available to the Library and Learning Support Service at the University of Surrey to set up an “academic skills centre”. The decision was made to clear an entire floor of the University Library (some 600 sq. metres of space) and existing staff based in the University’s Centre for Learning Development were asked to transfer to LLSS in order to lead the initiative and establish this Centre as a resource for all Surrey students – and staff.

Now, nearly 18 months later, the building work is almost complete – existing walls have been knocked down and new ones put up. The furniture is ordered and the colour scheme agreed and we have a name – SPLASH! - an acronym standing for **S**tudent **P**ersonal **L**earning **A**nd **S**tudy **H**ub. Over time we hope that the meaning of the acronym will be less important and the word sufficiently abstract to encompass changing needs and emphasis.

Whilst this has been a fairly stressful period for all concerned (especially the Librarians who had the job of moving 2,500 shelves worth of volumes off the floor – equivalent to nearly 19 football pitches laid end to end!), in a sense, this has been the most straightforward part of the project. The question now being asked across the campus is “what are you going to be doing in that space?” and this is where the complexity begins for the staff charged with developing the Centre.

The JISC publication “Designing Spaces for Effective Learning” (HEFCE, 2006)¹ states that a learning space should “*be able to motivate learners and promote learning as an activity, support collaborative as well as formal practice, provide a personalised and inclusive environment and be flexible in the face of changing needs*”.

Hopefully we have designed and built a physical space that will allow for much of this but as to whether it will motivate learners and promote learning as an activity, time will tell and we will be regularly monitoring the use of SPLASH to see if we are achieving this.

Barnett and Coate (2005)² discuss engaging students and talk about “structured space” within the curriculum such as work in a laboratory or a studio, or writing an essay. We are hoping that SPLASH will be seen as a structured space that allows students to engage with learning but in order to begin creating this environment, we must listen to the student voice. In order to kick start this process, we decided to initiate a dialogue with students who were able to reflect on their learning activity since joining the University and to offer their thoughts, opinions and ideas as to how SPLASH could be best utilised.

Through SCEPTre, Surrey’s Centre for Excellence, staff in SPLASH are working with a second year Psychology student who has an interest in this area. She has organised and conducted student focus groups on our behalf, primarily to inform SPLASH staff as we begin to initiate and develop the service but also to begin exploring how students engage with learning.

The reason why this is a “work in progress” is because the student focus groups will take place in mid to late February (therefore we cannot give an indication of our findings at this stage) and also because the work will be ongoing for another 18 to 24 months. The findings of the focus groups in February will form the basis of this paper which will be co-delivered by SPLASH staff and our student collaborator.

References:

- 1 JISC e-learning and innovation team (2006) *Designing Spaces for Effective Learning* HEFCE

