

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

Introduction

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, 18 months later, the building work is complete – existing walls have been knocked down and new ones put up. Colour schemes agreed, the furniture is arriving 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, the physical creation of the space was fairly straightforward (although the Librarians involved would undoubtedly disagree!) 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. Others describe the higher education environment defined as it is by its purpose, values, systems and structures as clearly affecting the attitudes and behavioural patterns of its students.³ (Fazey et al, 2001)

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 wanted to listen to the student voice, which in turn would indicate attitudes and behavioural patterns. As a starting point 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 for Professional Training, staff in SPLASH are working with a second year Psychology student who has an interest in this area. She organised and conducted two 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. These workshops took place mid-February and some of the findings emerging from the discussion appeared to support some of the planning that has already gone into SPLASH, however, the students certainly gave us a lot more to think about.

Hence, this paper is a “work in progress”. SPLASH will be offering a limited service to students from April 2007. A full service will be offered from September, based on feedback received at these focus groups and subsequent feedback received from students when they start using the space from April.

Gathering the data

The SPLASH initiative is proving to be an exciting opportunity but an enormous challenge. The physical space was designed in partnership with an architect and is gradually developing into what we hope will be an inspirational environment but the burning question was what – exactly - are we going to do with it? We are very fortunate at Surrey in having lots of enthusiastic members of staff who have taken a keen interest in SPLASH since the idea was first mooted. They have given freely of their thoughts and suggestions which have been taken on board but as the idea is to get students engaged with the space, it seemed sensible to ask the students themselves. Lizzio et al argued recently that:

“It is one thing to suggest such a task, but quite another to undertake this in a meaningful and systematic fashion”⁴

Nevertheless, we felt very strongly that the way to proceed was to engage in a dialogue with students and in this we were very lucky to have the services of a second year Psychology student, who was keen to work with us on this. She convened two focus groups calling on her cross-University network of students to participate and we had sufficient numbers of students to put on two focus groups which took place over two dark, cold February evenings, between five and six pm. Students were paid £10 for participating in the discussion and refreshments were laid on for them as well. A total of 12 students took part in the two focus groups - from first year undergraduates to postgraduates, mature students and international as well as home students, and from a wide range of disciplines – Psychology, Law, Retail Management, Physics, Languages, Engineering, Politics etc.

The discussions were led by our student colleague and were taped and subsequently transcribed and analysed by her. The following findings draw largely on her analysis with some observational comments of my own.

Findings

- **Physical location.**

There was some discussion in both groups about the fact that SPLASH is located on the third floor of the Library. The first group particularly focused on this during their discussion and seemed to have some difficulty separating Library provision from SPLASH provision. Sarah noted later that this was less apparent from the second group as she had developed some confidence in facilitating the discussion by the time the second group met and so she was better able to move the discussion along.

“What is the third floor going to offer that other floors don’t already? Unless there’s something provided to justify me going out of my way to study there, then I won’t bother”

This is something that the SPLASH team have been concerned about – the need to establish the SPLASH identity whilst remaining part of overall Library and Learning Support provision.

“There’s nothing else to do in the Library except learn and work. There’s no possibility of recreation, giving yourself a break. If you do, it’s go and sit down and stare at the wall and then come back”

Hopefully the SPLASH space will change this perspective but the café area which will be developed in the Library over the summer will make a major contribution.

“Yeah, a café in there. One good resource to have would be a café area”

Both groups highlighted the need for relaxation during their studying time, which they saw as not really an option currently on campus as facilities tend to be very work focused or the exact opposite with the cafés and bars on campus being very much social spaces. Students felt that if the SPLASH

environment was more like a home environment, with opportunities to relax during study, that would be most welcome and make the space very popular.

“So if there’s just an area where it’s slightly more, I don’t know, just an area where you can actually relax. I know it’s going to sound like it’s a social thing but you sometimes need some sort of social area to discuss things.”

“An important aspect of the room to attract me to learn there, bright colours, clear and functional with good information. Those will be the key things to assisting learning.”

- **Resources**

It emerged from both groups that students are learning from a wider variety of media – interactive, audio-visual material (such as films and documentaries) than from the traditional books or journal articles, possibly a reflection on today’s culture of TV and video games. The emphasis on providing CDs or DVDs as a resource and blogs/podcasts/video conferencing seem to suggest that students don’t want to sit alone reading endless pages, they want to learn from more accessible material.

“Most things I remember are from TV, documentaries. I learn better when it’s not written down, I have to say it aloud in my head.”

“I think the best thing is streaming videos through the PC’s. It’s just software, it’s easy.”

“Advantage of SCEPTRe is they have cameras and the opportunity comes up where you can video your presentations, it can be a good way to use technology to combine your course and the real world.”

“Would you have any video-conferencing facilities? In hospitality industry, learning comes from experience in the practical domain. It’s not interesting going to lectures and reading books, I like to go beyond that and it would cover the transition between academic and real world”

It was also worth noting however, that the emphasis wasn’t always on technology.

“Forget projectors, something I find really useful in business, it’s called a whiteboard, really cheap, really efficient. Even just a small one...”

“In business, when I was on placement, every senior manager had their own whiteboard. Shows how valuable white boards are.”

“As well as whiteboards, flipcharts as well”

Me: *“I thought paper was on its way out?”*

“No, don’t underestimate paper. We love paper!”

These were interesting points for SPLASH staff to consider. IT and audio visual resources had obviously been considered and were in the process of being ordered but we were being steered away from whiteboards by the technical support staff and here, students were getting quite passionate about their desire to have access to more basic resources.

- **Communications**

In addition to the resources discussed in the section above, it was apparent that students use technology, such as mobile phones and MSN (which are generally thought of as more social applications) to facilitate their learning. Use of this technology is not permitted within the Library building and other parts of the campus like department foyers and the open access network. The students in the focus group placed a great deal of importance on being able to communicate with their colleagues in ways other than just face to face.

“MSN – people could be using it as a learning aid – helps them cope, don’t feel isolated”

“Need to give students the benefit of the doubt that people are going to use MSN appropriately”

“Maybe there should be a mobile friendly area or room”

“MSN isn’t accessible from anywhere in the University, it’s one of those things that you have to use at home. If you’re working in a group and you’ve nominated someone to come into the Library, look something up and then communicate it to others, you’ve got to go home to tell them.”

“I know I did some of our stats revision with someone else, she was in Reigate, I was in Guildford and we sat on MSN all night – she would MSN me saying “I’m stuck with this” and I would be able to help her out and she did the same for me. It was so useful.”

“Everyone needs an outlet apart from their degree to interact, whether that’s students, companies, internationally, or whatever.”

Linked to communication was the issue of noise! Both focus groups referred to noise when studying and there was a definite divide between those who needed silence and those who needed background noise. However, all agreed that it had to be controlled noise unlike the situation in the only other group study area in the library.

“I know what doesn’t help me much when I am in the library in the group study area and lots of people are studying together very noisily and talking together – I can’t concentrate to save my life.”

“Whenever I go down to the group study area in the library and it’s full and it’s like trying to study in the jungle.”

“The fourth floor in the library is a group area, but people go in there for fun when they don’t want to work.”

“The atmosphere on the fourth floor is nice because I don’t like studying in silence. Sometimes I am forced to go to the fifth floor where the silence is louder than the fourth floor people! It’s nice to have a nice friendly atmosphere but controlled, without it being too obviously controlled.”

Noise is an area of concern for SPLASH staff but not something we can begin to address until students start using the space and we identify where, if any, problem areas occur. The current group study area is not staffed so it maybe that the staff presence in SPLASH contributes to keeping noise at acceptable levels – time will tell!

- **Wider engagement**

There was a feeling amongst both groups that the University is very segregated and that SPLASH could possibly play a role in integrating the University, departments and various groups. It was felt that one way of doing this would be for SPLASH to act almost as a central information point – the students felt this would allow them to access things they currently don’t know about/can’t find out about – or can’t be bothered to find. This would enhance their learning and HE experience and would also lead, perhaps, to a more integrated, enthusiastic student body which in turn could reduce some of the perceptions of a large separation between staff and students.

“Just letting people know things are happening is important. If there could be a particular place where all these notices are, maybe if it’s all up on a screen somewhere, just to highlight different things that are happening.”

“To have info. about other providers and the Students Union available in a central hub would be useful”

“I think SPLASH should play a role in building the community. It’s quite closed now, it should be used to bring people together for whatever reason, interview skills, business people, just bring departments together.”

"You come out of school then it's very impersonal at university. You don't get an opportunity to develop skills and interact with others unless you really throw yourself in there. I am really happy something like SPLASH is going to be there and especially in the Library. You know, if something's in SCEPTRÉ "where's SCEPTRÉ?" Students are lazy, me included, and in the library it can be a really good forum for you to make it what you want it to be. To get lots of students involved."

There was a strong feeling, particularly from the second group that the University is a very academic experience with no sense of "real life" and students wanted more real life, or contact with industry, connected to their learning to make a better transition between the academic and professional worlds. It was interesting to note that a University like Surrey, noted for its professional training experience, with most courses offering a placement year, students still feel a lack of professional/"real life" experience whilst at university.

"This is a problem with universities in general. There is a gap between academic and professional life. There are all these theories, but situations change and having a point of contact in the industry you are studying - it is crucial"

"In the real world, lawyers will need to talk to business people, engineers will need to talk to people, you need to have those links with other people. There's no point coming to university to only talk to the people on your discipline"

"University is about building networks and I am only learning this in my final year."

"Actually this is what counts. Attending lectures, reading books, I am not interested at all. I am interested in talking to people, getting feedback."

- **SPLASH staff**

It was becoming clear, based on the comments already noted, that students want a personal experience with their learning; that is they want to interact and communicate with people, rather than study in isolation. They sometimes feel however, that because this is not how their degree programmes are constructed, when they are required to work in groups or exchange knowledge, they need support with facilitation etc. Both groups felt that SPLASH could provide services that encourage interaction and communication, and also provide staff to help facilitate group work in a way that encouraged students to develop their own skills in this area.

"Have staff around that know what they're talking about, willing to sit in on certain things, just having someone there to discuss things."

"Staff in SPLASH should wander around and talk to the students"

"Having a meeting is difficult at University. We're never trained in how to work as a team. We're given the theory but no practical. In one meeting we had an agenda and it wasn't being followed – if there was one person to say "let's keep to it" – an impartial person, a facilitator,, that would be really useful."

"Even for presentations, someone to give feedback"

The students also appeared to want access to support as and when appropriate for them.

"It's very much that you have your lectures and then you go and read on your own and I know that my lecturers aren't that supportive if I need any extra support."

They discussed standard scheduled provision in areas like the library and noted that they would find it more useful to be able to access some support (whether from a member of staff or a postgraduate student) as and when they needed it.

"It would be a great help, especially for first years, trying to figure out which way is up with regard to the whole library referencing system, using the whole online databases which can be a real nightmare"

until you get used to it. I know that stuff would have really helped me out when I needed it, that would have saved me a whole lot of hassle and pain”

“Also with the scheduled sessions, they are almost too early. I remember our journal article session was way before we were using journal articles and by the time we got it, I couldn’t remember anything”

There are currently two vacancies on the SPLASH team for Learning Development tutors so we will be able to refer to this feedback when compiling the job descriptions. It may be possible for us to appoint students in one of the roles which would help begin the peer assisted learning approaches we are hoping to facilitate from SPLASH. This may help us overcome some of the perceived problem areas identified by the focus groups with regard to group working and facilitation skills.

Conclusion

The students who took part in the focus groups were very creative and innovative in their suggestions and discussions. They were very forthcoming with their suggestions and listened to each others ideas, developing them as a group. They appeared to be pleased that we were seeking their thoughts and ideas and in both groups we had free flowing discussion, respect for the opinions of others and very little negativity. The focus groups highlighted that it is possible to ask students what they would like to see in spaces designed for them and they will offer sensible and innovative suggestions and be prepared to offer feedback in the future. Despite the caution from Lizzio et al noted above, they also observed that:

“A number of practitioners have identified the informational and motivational “value added” of “direct conversations” between students and staff in the course improvement process..... Such interpersonally based processes enable us to not only gain a sense of students’ perceptions of subjects but also explore their sense of the underlying causes of problems and suggestions for change.” Lizzio et al (2002)⁵

Our student focus group facilitator expressed the view amongst students that their voice is not listened to, but when asked, they have a lot to offer. As others have noted in the past *“students’ perceptions are, of course, only one source of information in making decisions”* and so have to be considered in the light of expectations, requirements and perceptions of others (Lizzio et al. 2002)⁶

Emerging from the discussion was the suggestion that there are gaps in the student learning experience and there is a need for a resource like SPLASH which has the potential to make a real difference to the student experience and changing the culture of the University. The next stage in the SPLASH development is to begin realising that potential but the development is likely to remain a “work in progress” for some time to come.

References:

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