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# **The impact of new forms of learning space in maximising social, enquiry based, and experiential learning - a case study of Northumbria University**

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## **Background**

*Northumbria University has an established education strategy that engages students in critical scholarship and enquiry as partners in learning. This is particularly appropriate to professional education which lend itself to problem solving and experiential learning. This is manifested by a pedagogy emphasising the importance of enquiry based research activity in which learners collaborate with peers, employers, and tutors using a range of technology enabled and individualised learning interventions including coaching, groupwork, tutorial and workshops. The aspiration to collaborative social learning cannot be achieved without investment in the estate to facilitate these activities.*

This strategy has been informed by scholarly research relating to the distinctive needs of millennial learners who as a societal group demand intellectual challenge, relevance, social networks, social learning, access to mentors and inspirational leaders and opportunities to be entrepreneurial (Martin and Tulgan, 2001; Allan, 2005; Giordani, 2005; Redmond, 2008). Later studies by Ashridge (2009) noted the need for HEIs to take these characteristics into consideration when designing their curriculum (*and their estate*)

A range of research activities within Northumbria students and alumni, including focus groups and interviews also reinforced published research highlighting research led experiential and problem based learning approaches can accelerate millennial learner engagement.

Gutman and Glazer (2009) highlight space design as a key enabler of such learning approaches. Specific factors cited include location and spatial structure of facilities, circulation and communication, visual properties, amenities, social values, attitudes, status and cultural norms expressed by the environment.

Recognizing the need for multiple forms of learning space, the university drew on the research of Walzer (1995), Laing et al (1998), Duffy (1997, 1998) and Myerson and Ross (2003, 2006) to create learning space which would facilitate experiential, and practice-based learning. The outcome has been a mix of single and open-minded space incorporating team project, cellular, carrel, lounge, study view and enclosed study areas.

This has resulted in uniquely designed learning hubs in each of our university buildings both in Newcastle and London. This includes specific open access experiential learning areas, undergraduate zones, postgraduate zones, enquiry-based learning, student consultancy and research areas. Many of these are tailored to specific departments and faculties and offer a mix of individual and group learning areas. There is further focus on technology enabled resources to allow opportunities for further learner, tutor, support teams and in many instances, employer collaboration.

## **Approach**

The research undertaken has considered the impact of such learning space upon the student experience. Specifically, using a qualitative research approach based upon faculty specific focus groups we have gathered feedback from millennial learners to understand how space is best used and where improvements can be made.

In addition to the formal focus group consultations, the research has been characterised by an ethnographic approach (Draper, 2014) by observation over time and engaging students in conversations about their approaches to learning and their use of space. The focus of the observations was with the Architecture and Built Environment disciplines, Business School and library space.

## **Outcomes**

As university investment in learning environments continues to grow and pedagogy shifts away from more traditional lecture and seminar type delivery, this case study outlines key lessons learned in relation to creating new forms of social learning environment and specifically provides guidance for those innovating their campus footprint into which forms of single and open-minded learning space are most beneficial to millennial learners.

## **Variety**

The university has invested significantly in its Student Central HUB designed to create a multi-disciplinary learning space, open 24/7 in the heart of the Newcastle Campus. Housed within a 2017 refurbishment of a 1970's built seven storey Library Building which has over the years undergone significant redesign. The latest iteration has been the recladding of a single storey annex in glass curtain walling to provide a 'Student Central' one stop shop for student administration, welfare, careers, employability and independent learning and group based enquiry. Study facilities have been provided across all floors in a proliferation of open and closed minded styles, or using terminology from Myerson and Ross (2006), Academy and Nodal designs, including collaborative work spaces, masses of individual and group IT workspaces, quiet space, networking areas and the extremely popular enclosed study pods, what have become known as 'beach huts' for student meetings. In this building learning activity can be catered for in a variety of settings each designed for the diverse requirements of millennial students. Lighting, wall and surface colour, flooring, furniture and artwork has also been used to differentiate areas and create a varied aesthetic to symbolise open or closed minded locations.

## **Exclusivity**

A further recently created learning space is the Business Clinic, home to the experiential learning module for final year undergraduate and postgraduate students at Newcastle Business School. The Business Clinic has dedicated staff in a separate building away from the main Business School teaching spaces. The year-long module allows students to work in group with real clients in the city to help them solve business problems; the students are supervised by senior academic staff and work with their clients to provide business consultancy reports.

Again adopting a mix of open and closed minded space, the Business Clinic is on the ground floor of a modern building with small Harvard lecture theatre and HUB with several collaborative work desks, concentration space and social learning areas. Recognising the benefits of learning from peers and professional experts, the space adopts a Guild design (Myerson and Ross, 2006). The feature which appeals to millennial learners is the fact that the space is their exclusive domain with key card access for Business Clinic students only. The atmosphere is subdued and serious, reflecting the professional approach they will soon encounter in the workplace. The students have left behind the frivolous first year and more settled second year and have often completed placement programmes. As such they are increasingly career focused and don't need to mix with more junior learners. They see the transition to Business Clinic as replication of moving from compulsory education to sixth form or further education and the associated status privileges attached to such a move, such as access to bespoke learning and social areas. The closer daily interaction with academic and support staff is also aligned to the millennial learner need for engagement with leaders and specialists.

The Business Clinic is one of the jewels in the crown for Newcastle Business School, the exclusive work space is evidence that students are special and they feel special, they work hard and produce excellent professional reports for their clients.

## **Community**

Further adopting a mix of Guild, Academy and Nodal (Myerson and Ross, 2006) learning space, the Faculty of Engineering and Environment Geography HUB, is an open access space with collaborative work desks, banks of individual computers and lounge area with sofas and tables - so far quite normal. What makes it different is primarily the fact that the space is surrounded by academic staff offices. This, in a similar vein to the Business Clinic, gives the space a community feel and students are able to forge deeper relationships with their academic colleagues. Staff have to walk through the HUB space to access their offices and such this proximity leads to many casual meetings between staff and students. This contact is further enabled by having a communal kitchen thus facilitating 'water cooler' conversations and an easy familiarity between staff and students.

The space is actively managed by a small group of staff who timetable events, including the provision of cake and biscuits as often as possible. There are also playful Geography related posters to encourage student interaction (and thought) for example an outline map of the UK with the invitation to mark-up 'where the north starts' as may be imagined there are many lines and ribald comments .

This egalitarian space appeals to millennial students, although a contrast to the Business Clinic, it is a sharing space with all years of students and more importantly academic staff who have a genuine affinity to their students.

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