THE STUDY CENTRE APPROACH
breaking the mould in Worcs

FIFTEEN HUNDRED YEARS
of libraries

GETTING PEOPLE TO JOIN
why is it hard?

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I am Cataloguer, hear me roar!
Breaking the mold of the study centre approach

At an FE college in Worcester, the traditional library has been replaced by study centres with a significant increase in staff, in a move to focus on the learner, report Kate Gardner and colleagues. How did this radical change go down with the students, the staff and the teachers?

In 2002 Worcester College of Technology looked successful. It was financially sound and enjoying satisfactory recruitment, and, in the previous year, an inspection by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) judged the auditory curriculum areas and five areas of cross-college provision either 'good' or 'satisfactory'.

The executive and the governing body were, however, concerned that attainment and achievement were falling short of the highest standards in some curriculum areas. These concerns had been raised both by local quality-reporting mechanisms and by the FEFC report, which also criticised the library as being too small and in need of refurbishment.

Worcester is a general further education college with approximately 12,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) FE students and 2,590 FTE non-FE students (including nearly 1,000 FTE 14-16 year-olds and approximately 600 FTE higher education students). The campus consists of predominantly 1960s buildings, with little room for expansion. Most of the buildings are clustered in the city centre but some are more than one mile from this central cluster.

As part of a package of measures designed to tackle poor retention and achievement, it was decided to look at replacing the existing conventional library and drop-in PC provision with a number of distributed, curriculum-based study centres, each containing IT equipment, IT learning and teaching space, learning resources, and access to both academic and learning support staff.

This decision was championed by a new college Principal, who believed this approach could change the existing culture of the college from one based on teaching to one based on learning. The approach had been seen as successful at Somerse College of Arts & Technology (SCAT)* and South East Essex College (SEEIC)*. We were also reassured by the college’s experience of operating a language centre consisting of language laboratories, books, computers and a seminar room.

Pedagogic drivers

It is widely understood that students learn best when constructing their own knowledge and understanding, in a social environment. We also believe that the understanding and success of students is underpinned by their ability to understand what they are learning in different contexts. As such, the study centres enable students to support and learn from each other, while presenting them with different learning stimuli in which they interact with concepts and knowledge, and articulate their understanding. Since individual learning is different, even those studying for the same qualification need to know different learning rates and at times appropriate to their existing stage of progress. Current levels of technology can provide learners with wide flexibility in accessing knowledge. The study centre enables students to become autonomous learners.

Study centres present a different environment, which students attend for formal teaching, study on their own or access one-to-one sessions for additional support. We believe students in many colleges are only vaguely aware of the work that staff and other students undertake to support what are often large organisations and workplaces. In study centres, they can see staff and other students carrying out their work or studies. They can interact with other students of different abilities, or at different stages in their education or career, where this is appropriate, and receive support. The design of the study centres is such that they can understand their own responsibilities for managing and planning their own learning and for conforming to social norms, codes of conduct and ways of working.

It is important to stress that this approach to learning is not seen as ‘cost-cutting’, it is not about reducing the guided learning hours for programmes of study nor is it about reducing the impact of teachers facilitating learning. It is dependent upon the collaboration of teachers and study centre staff to provide the best possible learning activities to encourage students in successful academic achievement.

Phased implementation necessary

In September 2003, WCT received approval from the Learning & Skills Council to begin a £6m refurbishment plan, which included the development of eight curriculum-specific study centres. A body of project advice existed, e.g. from UFI*, which encouraged us to aim for an immediate full implementation. However, it was decided to adopt a phased implementation because we needed to provide a service for students during refurbishment and we also did not have enough staff or financial resources to go for full implementation. Early use of the centres was restricted by the need to provide open access for students from other curriculum areas during the refurbishment period.

The first new study centre opened in Easter 2004 in a newly acquired former police station. More specifically, the centre – for the use of Law students – was created in what was the old court room. The development was funded by Centre of Vocational Excellence funding and was the only centre designed and fitted out by a firm of library suppliers. Not surprisingly this centre, complete with wireless laptops and purpose-built furniture, that became the college’s showpiece.

Valuable lessons were learned from this early phase, the centre, reinforcing the need to have a flexible design, for both short-term effectiveness and future-proofing. Ten further study centres have now opened. Notable features of these are the shell from an ex-BAC111 air-plane in the Travel & Tourism Study Centre (in which to deliver cabin crew training) and the dance floor and music practice rooms equipped with keyboards, drum kits and guitars in the Music Technology & Performing Arts Centre.

Limits of using existing buildings

Adapting existing buildings to accommodate distributed study centres presented different challenges to building new. Existing infrastructure inhibited the inspirational and motivational design you see, for instance, in new-build learning spaces illustrated in Jepson’s Designing Spaces for Effective Learning, and also placed constraints on the size and layout of study centres. This resulted in their design not always being ideal. Motivational features such as airplane shells and musical equipment compensate to some extent.
The college believes that a critical factor in determining a particular study centre's effectiveness is the availability of study space and lecturer accommodation. Although it was possible to accommodate these clusters in the same building, the lack of suitable rooms meant some compromises had to be accepted. A radical reorganisation of college accommodation would have been needed to achieve the desired proximity.

Staffing increase

The transition to study centres has resulted in a significant increase in staffing (28 instead of 10). Healthy numbers applying for these posts enabled staff with appropriate subject experience to be appointed and, this, we believe, contributed to the positive responses in a survey carried out this year. In this, 75 per cent of 459 students completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement ‘I can ask study centre staff for help with my coursework/studies’. This view is consistent with a recent SWOT analysis carried out by Study Centre Assistants which identified strengths ‘staff skills and expertise’ and the ‘Customer focus’ of study centre staff, further supported by the view of an HND Law student that study centre staff were ‘very helpful’. The majority of existing library acre successfully applied for posts in the study centres. The introduction of this brave new world was not for them. One of these has since had a change of mind and successfully applied for a Study Centre Assistant’s post that became available. The commitment of library staff to adapt to the new study centres concept was confirmed by the involvement of the Principal in all the original interviews for both Sector and Study Centre Assistants.

Management of individual study centres is primarily the responsibility of a Study Centre Assistant, although academic departments timetable taught sessions within the centre, and regular liaison meetings enable academics to contribute to major decision-making (e.g. opening hours). The 2001 FEFC inspection found good liaison between library and academic departments. Staff work constructively together, although there have been issues relating to ownership and communication. The success of the study centres and the pressured environment in a successful FE college have led to instances where academics have made decisions on the use of study centre facilities without going through the proper channels and procedures. Part of the reason for this may be the remoteness of some staffrooms from some study centres but it is probably more to do with ownership. Teaching staff value and want to use the study centres for a wide variety of activities.

Multi-disciplinary teams work in each study centre and are expected to help students in any appropriate way. This includes checking students into and out of the centre; individual and group learner support; information literacy training; learning styles analysis; issue books; materials creation on a virtual learning environment. This represents a significant change in role for shop-floor library staff, similar to the emergent role of HE LIS staff proposed in Ward.

Achieving consistency

Our main concern among the study centre staff that the distribution of the centre’s

capacities could lead to an inconsistent approach. So a number of cross-centre working parties and activities were devised. A collective staff development meeting is now held once a month with minimal staffing in the centres. Originally these meetings were an hour long, alternating between the closed and open study centres, but this was scaled down in the face of protests from users. All these all-together sessions are invaluable and involve a variety of activities and training. Additionally, Senior Study Centre Assistants organise other study sessions at least once a month, and cross-centre groups meet on an ad hoc basis to examine and analyse topics such as evaluation, induction and marketing.

Although a specific member of staff is responsible for the organisation of study centre sessions, student centre staff are employed as learning resources staff and can be asked to provide cover when needed in other centres. This has the added advantage that staff have the opportunity to experience practices in other study centres.

The role of the library manager has changed from one of a traditional librarian, managing a small team in one location, to that of a manager of a large team based in four different buildings and nine different locations. People-handling skills are of crucial importance. This new role also places a much greater emphasis on pedagogical issues and liaison with other members of the college management team.

After one year of operation, student success rates improved. At Level 1 there was year-on-year improvements for 19+ students, with 16-18 students scoring above the national averages for all long courses. At Level 2 there were year-on-year improvements for both age groups. At Level 3 two study centres showed improvements in year 1; we believe the impact of the study centres is flexible and changes week by week. At Level 3 the study centres have experienced the study centre environment. National Vocational Qualifications improved by nine per cent points above the national average, and the 19+ age group improved by 12 per cent points above the national average in 2005.

We believe our study centres improved learning, in greatest the less confident view expressed in Roberts. The college has received a number of complimentary observations from visiting senior FE managers: ‘We were inspired as a result’; ‘Perceptual buzz from happy students’.

As expected, the impact on the delivery of curriculum varies between study centres. Within some departments, the study centre has supported a significant change in curriculum delivery. Generally, during time-tabled sessions in these centres, students meet briefly with their lecturer in a breakout room and then work individually or collaboratively in the main body of the centre on a series of tasks that support ‘extended learning outcome’ achievements. These tasks and supporting learning resources are often achieved via the college’s VLE. Further support is offered by the lecturer and, pleasingly, also by the centre staff. This model of staffing by both lecturers and centre staff is similar to that reported to SEEC.

Study centre staff have been encouraged by the industrious attitude of students: ‘This encourages students to take responsibility for their own behaviour as they would in the workplace’. The open-plan style of study centres, the fact that purposeful discussion is encouraged and the use of large tables facilitate group activity and communication.

Staff in a department that focuses predominantly on traditional courses have generally adopted a more conservative approach to the study centres. In line with college policy, all their courses have slots timetabled in the study centres; however, there is a tendency for lecturers to use breakout rooms as traditional classrooms for the whole of the timetabled slot. When the main body of the study centre is used in sessions, study centre staff are generally less likely to be encouraged by the academic staff to support students.

Reasons for this reluctance to change may include the age profile of lecturers, embedded teaching practice, the vocational emphasis of curriculum, and the range of students. We are convinced that change will occur as the use of the VLE develops and as teaching staff have more opportunity to observe good practice in other departments.

Data from the 2006 survey supports our view that students both enjoy and make constructive use of the study centres.

80 per cent of 451 students completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement ‘I take using the study centres’.

81 per cent of 477 students completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement ‘Study centres help me work on my own’.

Problems of success

Some 69 per cent of students use the study centres outside classes. However, there is clearly potential to increase this, as 19 per cent of students stated they were unable to use the study centres when they needed to, and nine per cent of students did not realise that they could use any study centre. Pressures from an over-stretched campus and from the enthusiasm of some academic staff for the centres has resulted in the centres being heavily used for timetabled sessions. This has meant the study centre resources have often not been available for drop-in use by students, a problem identified by students in focus groups and by Study Centre Assistants in research.

At Level 1, students are trying to increase the number, size and use of all their study centres and to encourage students to use other study centres at busy times.

The use of laptops in centres is popular with students, enabling them to make more effective use of their time and to ensure that they are preparing work in good time. However, this has led to increased demand. Students are frequently tempted to use more fixed PCs with laptops as funds permit. But at the same time we will have to ensure that the free use of laptops remains a once per lifetime privilege. All HE students now receive an individual laptop for free of charge. The students are now being allocated to study centres.

We believe study centres can contribute further to student learning. We envisage a scenario in which academic staff are more readily available in study centres outside timetabled slots to support the work of students. This may lead to a radical reorganisation of the college’s accommodation in order to achieve the required proximity of academic staffrooms to the study centres.

Existing infrastructure was successfully adapted to accommodate curriculum-based study centres but we believe that more effective accommodation can be achieved in a new building, because motivational and inspirational design concepts can be used. Whatever the scenario, however, it is essential that flexibility is incorporated into the design.

The vast majority of library staff can not only manage the workload and responsibilities required in study centres, but also relish the challenge and opportunities offered. The majority of academic staff will adopt the good practice needed to get the most out of the centres. Some who prefer traditional teaching may need to adapt to their environment. However, most importantly, both need to develop in this learning environment.

References


3. (To be continued) Quality Learning at University, Open University Press, 2003.


8. 11 See the.

Kate Gardner (kgardner@staff.wor.ac.uk). Left in the picture, is Head of Library and Study Centre Desk and Patricia Watford is Vice-Principal — Quality and Student Support Services at Worcester College of Technology. John Cohn is a Teaching Fellow and Senior Librarian in Computing at the University of Worcester.