



The WOW factor: Professional development learning spaces

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In response to the shifting landscape of higher education, a small regional university has implemented a project-based strategic initiative to enhance the student learning experience by building institutional eLearning density to advance flexible and blended design and delivery of courses and programs. A surprising and unexpected side-effect of the initiative has been the impact of the project's purpose re-fitted learning space on reinvigorating academic's engagement in professional development activities and increasing their enjoyment of their professional practice.

This poster scopes the educational literature on authentic, technology-enabled learning spaces to enrich the student learning experience and applies these theoretical concepts to the professional development context.

Keywords: professional development, personalised learning spaces, authentic activities

Introduction

The next generation of turbulent times for higher education institutions is driven by the education reform agenda of access, participation and engagement coupled with shifting demands for universities to embrace performance funding, and a quality standard and regulatory framework (Transforming Australia's Higher Education System, 2009). In response to this dynamic landscape a small regional university with limited capital, resources and funding has implemented an intentional and strategic initiative to enhance the student learning experience by increasing the effective use of flexible learning and teaching, fostering staff and student learning capabilities in blended learning and teaching environments, and generating new academic leadership capabilities to maximise flexible learning and teaching settings.

This poster scopes the educational literature on authentic, technology-enabled learning spaces to enrich the student learning experience and applies these theoretical concepts to the professional development context. The purpose of this poster is to demonstrate the applicability and cross pollination of a student-centric approach to learning paradigms with the notion of transformative professional development practices and provision.

Context

The case University's strategic initiative was the province of a new project called the **eLearning and Flexible Delivery Advancement Project (eLEAP)**. The purpose of eLEAP is to enhance the student learning experience by building institutional eLearning density to advance flexible and blended design and delivery of courses and programs. This is primarily addressed through the eLEAP Fellowship Scheme and targeted eLEAP clients. The eLEAP team consists of a multi-disciplinary group of skilled

staff providing support, guidance and advice in: education design and learning technology design; digital and multimedia support; learning technology support; and professional development, education and training. The project initiative within itself is nothing new and there is ample evidence on university websites of institutions offering grants and seed funding to integrate learning technologies to enrich the student experience. However, eLEAP's evidenced-based approach to quality improvement has identified some surprising and unexpected side-effects in that the purpose re-fitted learning space has reinvented academic engagement in professional development.

Action research

The evolution of eLEAP is underpinned by an evidenced-based action research project – ‘Learning to Lead: An eLearning Action Research Study’. The methodology involves a cyclic process of Plan > Act > Observe > Reflect > Action > Plan where the action researchers are eLEAP Fellows (academics), and team members. For Fellows, eLEAP offers an experimental learning space to become innovators and reflective practitioners who will build their confidence, capabilities and leadership qualities in technology mediated educational contexts (Laurillard, 2008).

Action Research: Cycle 1 Reflection – learning space

A very early unexpected observation was the use of the descriptive word ‘WOW’. When eLEAP participants and guests entered the project space for the first time the common word (often repeated with a look of awe) was ‘WOW’. In an attempt to unpack this observed positive impact the eLEAP space had on academic participation and engagement in their professional practice, eLEAP Fellows and team members were asked to reflect on the learning space factors that influenced them.

The WOW factor: eLEAP learning spaces

Herrington et al (2003) advocates that authentic activities are central to online learning environments, suggesting that the completion of such activities effectively encompasses the entire student commitment to a course. This poster explores the belief that authentic professional development activities have a similar effect on the educator's commitment to their professional practice. eLEAP Fellows and team members were asked to reflect on the impact the learning space has had on them. A summary of the reflections is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Reflection on learning space

Participant	Reflection
Fellow 1	“I have a mental and physical place ...enables me to work with learning specialists, computing people and library staff in developing best practice for delivery of courses in a variety of modes. I will also be able to work with other Fellows, supporting and learning from each other”
Fellow 2	“The eLEAP space creates an intellectual and practical space that gives me permission to be a learner in the process of education. It provides a range of artefacts and activities to help me move into the intellectual space to explore and be innovative in my teaching approaches and course design”
Fellow 3	“[The eLEAP space] embraces the philosophy of providing a collaborative, innovative working environment...I feel very welcome and respected...it is particularly inspiring because it reflects creativity”
Fellow 4	“[The eLEAP space] assisted me to enhance student engagement...respond [to student needs] by provided webspaces that are interesting and interactive”
Team member 1	“Frankly, most offices are dull, boring, cramped and uninspiring... eLEAP breaks this down straight away by having a physical location where all members can come together. It allows for conversation, collaboration and communication.”
Team member 1	“ eLEAP has a visual aesthetic that defines the space... it created a buzz - there is an excitement and interest around the space... eLEAP changes the game”

The WOW factor: patterns of engagement

In responding to the iterative nature of action research, Table 2 constructs a framework to connect the pattern of engagement with the educational literature to give credibility to the reflections in Table 1, to strengthen the assertion that authentic learning environments are central to both learner and practitioner engagement, and to inform the next cycle of investigation in eLEAP's action research project.

Table 2: Patterns of engagement

Pattern of engagement	Educational literature
Physical space	An intentionally designed flexible, modular space with inspiring colour themes and soft furnishing supported by ICTs. Radcliffe's et al (2008) research emphasizes the importance and arrangement of space to influence patterns of learning and teaching
Personalised space	eLEAP provides an expert team to offer individualised guidance, support and advice to academics to create innovative pedagogy (Agostinho, 2009). This enables academics to personalise meaning and be active participants in their knowledge construction (Ally, 2008).
Experimental space	Fellows are provided with a safe and supported space to experiment and engage with a variety of authentic learning activities designed to achieve professional development goals (Herrington et al, 2003).
Community space	Fellows reflected that the eLEAP space enabled a sense of community and social presence which signals movement to a deeper more meaningful learning experience (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1996).
Collaborative space	The eLEAP space espouses the social constructivist learning theory where higher-order engagement is an outcome of collaboration, interaction and social presence to develop new knowledge, skills and attitudes (Ally, 2008).
Research incubator	eLEAP provides a supportive, non-threatening, cross disciplinary learning space to nurture scholarly research into professional practice.

Further work

As part of the next cycle of action research investigators will widen the scope of research in recognition that learning spaces are more than the intersection of pedagogy and technology. This poster establishes that learning spaces have real-world relevance and utility to the educator's level of engagement and commitment to their professional practice (Jonassen 1991, as cited in Herrington et al 2003). A further consideration will be the investigation of emerging research by Warger and Dobbin (2009) moving the discussion beyond learning spaces to learning environments that invites a wider range of participants including senior executive, administrators, guest experts, librarians, IT staff, education designers, learning theorists and researchers, and students.

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Please cite as: Mitchell, M. (2010). The WOW factor: Professional development learning spaces. In C.H. Steel, M.J. Keppell, P. Gerbic & S. Housego (Eds.), *Curriculum, technology & transformation for an unknown future. Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2010* (pp.641-644). <http://ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney10/procs/Mitchell-poster.pdf>

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