

Real@Caledonian: the Learning Café

Based on a paper given at the UKSG seminar 'The radical library: taking up the challenge', London, 13 November 2003

The Learning Café at Glasgow Caledonian University is presented as a positive solution to meeting the need for co-operative and collaborative learning environments. Learning is a social process. If e-learning and e-resources are decreasing the traditional social constructs such as lectures we need to develop alternatives. The Learning Café provides a valuable contribution to learner support. It is also part of Real – the local lifelong learning development initiative in Glasgow. Glasgow Caledonian is now building a new learning centre. How environments, technology and people should be used to support learning in the new learning centre is now being considered at Glasgow Caledonian University.

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Introduction to the concept of the Learning Café

This paper is about the importance of physical learning environments. The Learning Café, which opened in October 2001, is an attempt to provide an appropriate learning environment for students. Libraries have always provided a range of seating and access to resources. Cafés have always provided sustenance (food for mind and body) and places for interaction and contemplation. Before the Learning Café concept, most recent learning

environment developments related to computer access. These developments were usually the 'battery hen' model of computer access, with computers tightly packed onto tables with little room for or encouragement of interaction with other learners. Workstations stuck to desks with access to the world's resources does not seem that far removed from the concept of a medieval chained-book library.



*The author (left)
testing out the
Learning Café with
a colleague*

The Learning Café provides a social learning space; space that supports group learning. Students need to have space available to them to develop group projects and other forms of co-operative learning they have been directed to do. The Café is also about encouraging collaboration in learning. Network access to computers is available to encourage collaboration with people who do not happen to be in the room and to enable access to resources to support such co-operation. (The Learning Café has 190 seats with 80 computers distributed to encourage shared access.)

Students are far more likely to support each other in the Learning Café. The questions asked in there are different from those asked at other general enquiry or IT support desks. The encouragement of peer support and collaborative learning also builds confidence and legitimizes the learning process. The Learning Café helps students build relationships that support their learning. Social and academic discussions are all legitimate and

allowed to flow freely; deeper learning and interest in topics are enabled. Learning becomes part of people's lives and social relationships rather than something that happens at set times and in classrooms in the University.

The Café also provides human learning support. The initial idea was to have staff who walked around and casually engaged with the groups of students as they studied. However, that idea is being revised. How many readers of this article are Gap customers? I find it really annoying when I go into a Gap store to be asked by staff: "How are you getting on?" Do they think I am stealing something? Do they genuinely want to know how I am getting on? Students have a similar response in the Learning Café to staff trying to engage with them. Different models are still being tested to make support more proactive.

The Learning Café is also part of the Real Lifelong Learning network¹ for the City of Glasgow. Scottish Enterprise gave £150,000 towards



Students working and networking in the relaxed atmosphere of the Learning Café

developing the space as part of their initiative to encourage all citizens of Glasgow to access learning at any age. Any of the 30,000 registered people in that local network can now come in and use the Café. Introductions to IT or the Internet and various other courses offered online by the local network are supported either in the Learning Café or online. The Real network encourages people to have contact with the University. It acts as a drop-in facility for graduates of the University and hopefully encourages citizens of Glasgow to develop further learning links with the University.

In summary, it is a social learning space supported by technology but not dominated by it. The technology is used when it needs to be used. Clients do not have to use a computer even if they are sitting in front of one. Discussions over coffee create a relaxed environment. The Learning Café web site² includes lots of images, ideas to help students think about how they learn, a video presented by the University's Chancellor Magnus Magnusson and comments from students on the Learning Café – a selection of which appear below.

Comments from students

Question: What do you think about the Learning Café?

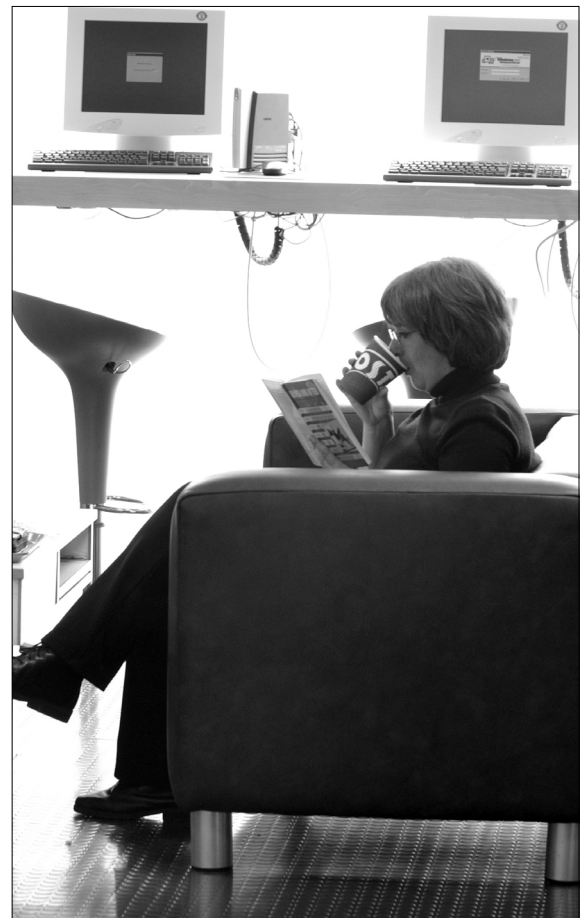
"I think it is extremely useful in our studies and you can sit and you can browse through the Internet, looking for some information for your research studies and you can also sit and chat to your friends."

"It's a good environment to come and meet friends. You are able to access obviously information for your studies that you are doing."

"People on my course tend to come down for having informal discussions to try and decide what sort of plan we are taking with our working group efforts."

"You get access to computers as well as being able to sit down in a group and be able to sit and discuss issues, so it is the sort of area that covers everything for you."

"I think it is very good for students to meet each other and to talk with each other in an informal atmosphere and talk about your assignments."



Members of the public as well as students are encouraged to register and drop in at the Café

"Go on the Internet if you are looking for articles for assignments and things like that."

"It has been a great addition to the Uni. Up until the café was here, most of the places we could meet up were quite formal and it was all hushed. It was difficult to get into the right frame. It always felt like you were at school all the time, whereas in the café you sit, you relax and it is easy to discuss things."

"It is meeting up, learning and having group discussion, group meetings. It is a really, really good tool."

Question: Do you think it has had an effect in any sense on how you think you learn?

"This year we have had a lot more group work than in previous years and whenever we have done the group work in previous years we have been somewhere to try and carry out the work, but I find it a lot easier in here to sit and talk, because the ideas come a lot easier and you can relax, have lunch or

a drink whilst you are having your discussions and that means everything does flow a lot better."

"I have been here for quite a while and I find that the Learning Café is a big improvement on what was previously there. You can talk and think the café is much more than sitting and actually getting a lot done, even though it isn't quite as academically strict as it used to be."

Question: What is the best thing about the Café?

"The fact that everything is here. You have got the library upstairs. You can go and get your books, bring them down and you don't have to book them out."

"Basically the relaxation and also you can do quite a lot of web-based research with a couple of other people, whilst you are sitting here."

"The fact that you have got access to the computers and you have got the machines there as well as being able to sit in a group and be able to access lap tops and things."

"It is just a nice environment. It has got nice brown leather couches that other universities don't offer, as far as I know."

In conclusion

With the move to electronic delivery of information resources, librarians need to give thought to

the setting up of different social arrangements in which people can learn together. If lectures are going online then students need additional social support network. The above comments from students reflect this and also illustrate that they feel they have ownership of the space. "Reform the environment; stop trying to reform the people. They will reform themselves if the environment is right" said Buckminster Fuller. This quote sums up the prevailing view at Glasgow Caledonian on what is the main success of the Learning Café. We have created an adult, non-institutional environment which encourages collaborative learning.

The Learning Services strategy at Glasgow Caledonian University is to view environments, technology and people (staff) as equally important to the success of learner support. A new Learning Centre has been commissioned and this development will include a services mall for all student services. A range of different environments will be offered with flexibility to meet changing patterns of need. How technology can be integrated to enable flexible use is also being considered.

References

1. Further information on Real is available at:
<http://www.intoreal.com>
2. <http://www.realcaledonian.ac.uk>