QUALITY REVIEW

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GOOD PRACTICE CASE-STUDY

Learning Spaces: physical, virtual and metaphorical

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Learning Spaces: physical, virtual and metaphorical

The conception and use of space is an important component in student-centred teaching. This case study focuses on a tripartite notion of learning spaces, namely the physical space of the learning environment, the virtual space for blended, online and technology-enabled learning, and the metaphorical which refers to blurring of professional boundaries and the emergence of the third space professional. While this case study is particular to the Office of the Vice-President for Learning & Teaching, the experiences and learning are relevant for staff across the University.

The Vice-President for Learning & Teaching has overall responsibility for learning and teaching at University College Cork and offers a wide variety of pedagogical, technical and research assistance to promote learning. The office aims to enhance learning and teaching and to provide support and recognition to all those involved in learning and teaching at UCC. The vision of Office of the Vice-President for Learning & Teaching is of a university where effective and innovative teaching and learning approaches are fostered and supported, and where a student-centered approach to research-led teaching is rooted in both academic and professional culture.

The Office of the Vice-President for Learning & Teaching (OVPLT) was established at University College Cork in 2008 and has responsibility for six units (Figure 1):

Figure 1: OVPLT Units and their functions

The intersection of pedagogy-technology-space (Radcliffe, 2009; Barry, 2011) is crucial for building opportunities and support for student-centred learning. By focusing first on learning spaces we are then prompted to look at how learner expectations influence teaching spaces, how learning spaces can facilitate or derail of learning, and the role of technology in learning and teaching enhancement.

In this case study we select five strands within the academic literature on learning spaces to demonstrate the alignment of the Office of the Vice-President for Learning & Teaching with current approaches to learning and teaching. The 5 strands are as follows:

1. ***Active Learning*** acknowledges that learning is socially constructed and culturally mediated through spaces (Graetz, 2006).
2. ***Learner Agency*** is amplified by current movements in learning cultures that are shifting from didactics to inquiry-based approaches within learning environments (Oblinger, 2006).
3. ***Learner Autonomy*** highlights how space can help to promote learner-centeredness which addresses the diversity of learner engagements (Gee, 2006).
4. ***Learning Communities*** highlight the multivalent nature of learning as expressed through distributed networks of knowledge production and dissemination which becomes central to knowledge evaluation. This lens acts as a frame for articulating the way in which the

affordances of virtual environments brings people together as part of learning communities outside of UCC (Lippincott, 2006).

5. *Third Space Professional* provides a lens through which to consider the multi-faceted nature of some of the staff roles within OVPLT, and how scope within these roles is changing as the lines between academic and administrative staff become more permeable (Whitchurch, 2015).

Taking the theme of learning spaces, we will now demonstrate how the vision of this office plays out within a selection of projects that are underscored by the uses of learning spaces as a means to promote active learning, learner agency, learner autonomy, and develop learning communities both within the university and beyond.

Review of Teaching & Learning Spaces at UCC

The themes of **learner agency, learner autonomy, active learning and learning community** underscore the review of teaching and learning spaces at University College Cork. Among the most important characteristics of university learning spaces that directly affect learning outcomes and student experience are:

- Flexibility of learning space;
- Support for diverse pedagogies;
- Support for educational technologies;
- Quality of physical space.

In order to assess these factors across the UCC campus a [review of all teaching and learning spaces](#) was undertaken in the summer of 2015. As learning and teaching methods and our understanding of learning spaces at UCC are evolving it was timely to undertake such a review and to assess our space in terms of the capacity to support effective teaching and learning. While learning environments in the 21st century include online and virtual environments as well as informal learning spaces and dedicated learning spaces such as laboratories, this review concentrated on physical on-campus learning spaces that are centrally bookable. It examined these spaces in relation to their teaching and learning capacity and experience, and to evaluate their physical condition and the adequacy of the instructional technology. Findings included the prevalence of high capacity rooms with fixed furniture and the then VP for Teaching and Learning launched a next generation learning spaces grants scheme to support the creation of innovative learning spaces more suited to active learning pedagogies.

Student Hub Research Programme

The themes of **learner agency, learner autonomy, active learning and learning community** underscore the Student Hub initiative. The Office of the Vice-President for Teaching & Learning is leading a multi-disciplinary research team, of students and staff, researchers and supervisors, with expertise across fields such as architecture, teaching & learning, education, technology, psychology and sociology to inform the transition to the Student Hub building in the centre of the campus by extending and conserving the historic Windle (medical) Building.

The Student Hub research programme aims to engage students and staff in the study of space design and the use of space to underpin the implementation of the Hub as an innovative space within which student learning and development will be facilitated and supported.

The programme has been created to build capacity and to support the transition to the Hub through interdisciplinary research and to strengthen capacity for relevant research. The specific objectives of the programme are the following:

- Engage students and staff in learning space design for the Student Hub;
- Inform the development of new spaces in the Student Hub, in relation to design, pedagogies and how space is used;
- Optimise teaching, learning and the student experience in the Student Hub;

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- Assess the impact of the Student Hub on teaching, learning, staff and student experiences.

A detailed understanding of how students learn, of how they interact with each other and with staff, and how this impacts on student welfare and the student experience is critical to the development of spaces such as the Student Hub at UCC to suit the diverse needs of students. This programme uses evidence-based criteria derived from the study of existing space at UCC to support future development in the spaces at the Student Hub and will subsequently evaluate the deployment of new space in the Hub. By bringing together previously dispersed and unconnected activities and programmes, the Hub will provide space within which more of our students take part in activities that impact significantly on their retention, progression, success and employability. Further information on the new Student Hub can be found at http://studenthub.ucc.ie/.

Online Accreditation in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
The promotion of active **learning** and **learner autonomy** through technology enhanced learning underscores the work of the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL) that offers part-time certified programmes, which are designed to give staff, and postgraduate students who teach, an opportunity to develop their teaching in support of student learning. These programmes provide opportunities for participants to take a scholarly approach and to avail of opportunities to present at conferences, write research papers and apply for research awards through excellence in teaching and learning (www.ucc.ie/en/cirtl/). Indeed, the consideration of learning spaces is a throughline of the accredited and non-accredited programmes coordinated by the Centre for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL), and can be a catalyst for staff engagement in Teaching and Learning development.

Ignite Your Teaching: CIRTL Seminar Series
This initiative promotes fosters **learning communities** by inviting participants to gain a certificate of participation through UCC's CPD Centre which reflects their commitment to professional development in Teaching and Learning. Learning spaces hold institutional memory. This seminar series is held in spaces across the university that resonate with these memories as counter-points in the promotion of **learner agency** and **learner autonomy** for previous seminars see www.ucc.ie/en/cirtl/staff/seminars/#d.en.110685

Glucksman and Jennings Galleries
Active learning underscores CIRTL's use of the Glucksman Gallery as a transformative learning space through the application of Teaching for Understanding framework for enactments in online and blended learning spaces see www.glucksman.org/discover CIRTL works with educators associated with the College of Medicine to promote Visual Thinking Strategies that promote **learner agency** and **learner autonomy**. The Jennings Gallery on the Brookfield campus promotes visual literacy and creative growth among the staff, students and graduates of the College of Medicine and Health www.ucc.ie/en/jennings-gallery/gallerymissionpolicy/
CIRTL's promotion of visual literacies to promote **active learning** and **learning communities** across UCC is documented by Daniel Blackshields *et al.*, (2014) *Integrative Learning International Research and Practice*. London: Routledge [Online] www.routledge.com/products/9780415711074.

Self-Service Library Studio
The facility promotes **active learning** and **learner autonomy** as part of the Next Generation space initiative. The studio provides video and audio recording facilities and is available to both staff and students. It is a One Touch automated system which allows you to record video presentations onto USB keys see http://instructionaldesign.ucc.ie/library-studio/

Digital Badges
This accreditation promotes **active learning** and **learner autonomy**. Micro-credentials, or digital badges, are being offered in most of the world's top ranked universities as students increasingly seek recognition for non-accredited extra-curricular contributions made during their studies. The badges refer directly to the university's seven essential values of *Creativity, Responsiveness,*

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Transparency, Scholarship, Freedom of Expression, Integrity, Equality, Diversity and Respect. These badges can be issued to UCC staff and students. The high-level strategic approach is to create the right conditions and an enabling environment that can put into practice the long term opportunity for digital badges within the University see www.ucc.ie/en/teachlearn/projects/digitalbadges/

Community-Academic Research Links (CARL)
This initiative promotes educational synergies between formal and informal **learning communities to promote learner agency and autonomy**. Building partnerships with external organisations, institutions and individuals locally, nationally and internationally is part of UCC's core mission. Teaching is enhanced by engagement with wider society, and at the OVPTL we strive to collaborate widely and to engage with external partnerships. Through these activities we gain a deeper understanding of the needs of society to inform our policies and strategic planning in developing our curriculum to support the best student learning at UCC. Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) is an initiative in UCC which provides independent research support to community and voluntary groups, in the region. The research is undertaken by students in collaboration with the community partners across a wide range of disciplines and usually free of charge. CARL is based on the Science Shop model and was one of the first of its type to be established in the Republic of Ireland in 2006. The first CARL projects with community partners began in September 2010. In its short existence, CARL has produced important pieces of research that have generated interest beyond the university and the project reports have impacted on government policy. CARL is extending its activities to establish a university-wide community-based participatory research approach within all four colleges, for further information visit www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/

Learning Neighbourhoods
This initiative promotes educational synergies between formal and informal **learning communities to promote learner agency and autonomy**. In 2015 Cork achieved a UNESCO award as a Learning City, one of only 3 cities in Europe and one of 12 cities worldwide. This award recognises Cork's continuing excellence and commitment to lifelong learning. Adult Continuing Education focuses on building partnerships with educational providers, community groups, the public/private and voluntary sectors to assist local education networks and organisations to showcase and develop lifelong learning opportunities see www.ucc.ie/en/aboutlnucc/

The Free University
This annual event, hosted by Adult Continuing Education, takes place during the Lifelong Learning Festival in springtime to promote **active learning** and **community engagement**. The Free University seeks to raise awareness of the integration of research, teaching and learning within the wider community see www.ucc.ie/en/learningneighbourhoods/llf/#d.en.847371

Skellig Centre for Research & Innovation (Skellig CRI)
This **learning community** is a partnership between University College Cork (driven by Adult Continuing Education), Kerry County Council, and South Kerry Development Partnership focused on the regeneration of Cahersiveen in County Kerry. This project commenced in 2016 and has now established a Centre in the town of Cahersiveen which is building higher education activity and research in conjunction with the local community and partnerships. Skellig CRI is a space that fosters collaboration, community building, and a higher education research spirit. Its learning community philosophy is underpinned by the spatial metaphor of the *Agora* or market place in Classical Athens to express the trading-zone of ideas exchange to promote local level collaboration with national and international research communities, emulating in a local context the impact of a third level institution on a rural community see www.ucc.ie/en/skellig/

Learning Partnerships with Prison Educators
This initiative promotes educational synergies between formal and informal **learning communities to promote learner agency and autonomy**. The learning partnership between University College Cork and the Education Unit, Cork Prison seeks to promote student agency within the prison community. It draws upon strengths of both communities: **active learning** fostered through

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collaboration at University College Cork and art practices fostered in the Education Unit. Educational partnerships give visibility to prison as social communities and remind us that prison and society are interconnected. This learning partnership engages with teaching and learning as an expression of social justice. It draws upon the aspiration of UCC as a university in the community, of the community and for the community for more information on this project see "A Learning Journey: UCC's Cork Prison students celebrate ACE art course achievement" *Independent Thinking* [Online] www.ucc.ie/en/mandc/ezine/ [accessed 15th December 2018].

Accredited programme in Higher Education Administration, Management & Leadership
This initiative speaks directly to the 'third space professional' which reflects the blending of administrative and academic functions such that OVPLT and other areas in UCC rely on staff who have a strong grasp of the academic and who can apply that in an administrative context. CIRTL will lead the new Postgraduate Certificate, Postgraduate Diploma and Masters in Higher Education Administration, Management & Leadership. The new accredited course for administration staff is planned to come on stream in UCC in late 2019 and provides an opportunity for administrative staff to gain an internationally recognised professional development qualification.

The examples shared above are illustrative of how a focus on learning spaces can encourage an orientation towards student-centred learning and teaching enhancement.

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