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Redesigning study spaces: noise-level zoning

Students increasingly want to use their library for social learning as well as quiet study. How can both be accommodated? **Dilys Young** and **Helen Finlay** found that changes had to be made to a learning centre designed in 2000.

Experiments with zoning the library into different study areas, with different noise levels, have been going on at Leeds Metropolitan University. With more and more students using PCs for group/social study, changes to the 2000 design was inevitable. But would it suit all students?

The library at Leeds Met's Civic Quarter Campus was opened in September 2000. It was planned as an integrated learning centre, housing the widest possible range of facilities and media to support students' learning under one roof. In order to achieve this a number of general principles were established including:

- flexible space to support the planned numbers of students and which could evolve over time to meet the changing needs of on- and off-campus students
- a study environment in which students could work individually or in a range of large and small group configurations
- a physical layout which, supported by appropriate induction, guiding and documentation systems, would increase the independence of students
- a design that would allow 24-hour opening
- future proofing
- a design that complied with the Disability and Discrimination Act and secured the welfare and convenience of disabled people
- high energy efficiency.

Study facilities

At the beginning of the 2004/05 academic year there were approximately 1100 seats available throughout the library, which included 500 PCs for use either on the open floors, in enclosed labs or in specialist labs. There were also 24 group study rooms (with a PC in each), individual study carrels, some large tables and eight labs which could be used by students when not in use for teaching.

Directional signage was minimal due to the easily accessible design, repeated on three of the floors. Corridors leading off the main floors contained 'noisy' spaces (which reduced noise on the floors) designated as 'phone zones'.

The open access PCs were separated from the quiet study spaces on the floors by rows of shelving. Initially this proved successful in minimising disturbance between the PC and quiet study areas; but as PC usage increased so did noise levels, and the sound insulation designed into the building by separating areas had become compromised.

Overall the design worked well with regard to separating noisy and quiet activities; for example printer/copier rooms and group study rooms were housed in corridors away from the main study areas.

However, the provision of large tables on one floor (the third) was acting as a temptation to those wanting to chatter and this was spreading to the other floors, with supposedly quiet areas becoming noisier throughout the building.

The provision of a silent study area, preferably in an enclosed room, was high on the wish list of some users. In addition, students

increasingly wanted to use the library for social learning.

The flexibility of the original design had enabled us to refine and adjust the services and space available with very little effort in the first few years of operation. During 2004/05 a number of complaints and comments were received from students about the lack of sufficient appropriate study areas for group work. There were also comments that the floors were too noisy and there weren't enough silent study areas.

By the summer of 2005 it was clear we needed to do more to balance the overall space to reflect both the changes in student learning requirements and their expectations of how the library would support these.

The ideas and drivers for zoning

We visited a number of other university libraries and talked to colleagues from across the sector, including within the university, to identify options. We saw a number of different ways of using space in new buildings and refurbishments, and incorporated some of these ideas into our proposals to zone the library into distinct learning environments on a floor-by-floor basis. We also considered:

- the need to relocate the Law Collection from the Headingley Library to the Civic Quarter Library
- the need to provide more PCs to accommodate student numbers resulting from the Law move
- student feedback identifying a lack of silent study space; a lack of group study areas; and the need for a large, bookable group room
- the need to try to maintain existing numbers of study seats.

Our solutions were to:

- locate the Law stock in a separate sequence on the second floor – leading to the removal and relocation of 44 study desk spaces
- site additional PCs on each floor, by consolidating services such as Opacs, CD and A/V facilities and moving slide readers and microform cabinets
- create a silent study zone on the first floor by relocating the 44 study carrels from the second floor – 32 of them being placed in two group study rooms to turn them into silent study rooms
- designate the whole of the third floor as a group study area, adding PCs where appropriate to the large study tables to create group PC spaces, allowing students to work in small groups of two or three around a PC. Different sizes of group areas could be created by removing study space dividers from the tables, and students would be encouraged to use this floor to hold group discussions to plan and prepare their work. The wireless network could also be extended to this floor
- allocate our library teaching room for group use outside teaching sessions and advertise its availability more widely
- ensure there was no reduction in overall study seats by reconfiguring space in different combinations and areas, e.g. more silent study, group and PC spaces, fewer quiet spaces.

Risks

There were concerns about some of the changes:

- zoning each floor would mean that students would need to take resources from some floors into a suitable space on another floor
- the group study zone might be too large to contain the noise levels generated by this type of learning activity and might disturb students on lower floors. Advice would be sought from Facilities Management about potential noise 'leakage' from the third floor to those below. Changed priorities for security patrols would be introduced, and publicity and information provided to ensure students were aware of the acceptable behaviour for each zoned area
- the large tables on the third floor might not suit some students.

Occupancy and activity levels would be

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monitored and analysed as part of a review of the pilot at the end of the first term. This would indicate trends in student learning and their preferred study environments.

Customer comments would also be closely monitored to see how well the changes were being received by students, and spot surveys undertaken to canvas student opinion further.

Implementation and evaluation

A project group was set up to oversee the moves and space reconfiguration. This was chaired by the Deputy Campus Library Manager and drew colleagues from a number of teams. Close liaison with Facilities Management and Computing Services was part of the project team's brief and there was also input from the library's Disability Support Officers to ensure that proposed changes were in line with current thinking on disability support.

The project was established as a pilot for the 2005/06 academic year with student feedback and statistical data used to monitor and assess its success. Other success factors would include:

- increased occupancy of each area
- positive feedback from students
- reduction of noise levels on those floors designated for silent and quiet study.

All study spaces would be monitored throughout the year to assess whether the balance of silent:quiet:group study areas met students' needs.

Feedback

We used our usual mechanisms to encourage student feedback, supplementing these with posters highlighting the customer comments scheme, a short survey distributed within the library and questions asked at course committees. An online survey was conducted towards the end of the first term asking users if we should keep the new way

of organising study areas or return to the previous arrangement.

Customer comments were received in hard copy and via the web and were captured informally by staff. Of the 10 received between September and November, four were in favour and six against the new arrangement. During the initial library survey, all those who responded were aware of the different study areas. In response to the question 'What do you think about the way the study areas have been organised?', 50 per cent were happy, 33 per cent unhappy and the rest neutral. The second survey at the end of the first term indicated increased satisfaction, and the termly meeting with the student union brought forward no major issues of concern. Feedback from course committees was again mixed but many students liked the idea, recognising that the library needs to cater for different study needs. Seventeen

per cent of respondents wanted to return to the previous arrangement, while 78 per cent felt that the separate floors should be retained. Five per cent didn't respond.

Summarising, many people find the group study floor too noisy. Those users who are most unhappy with the new arrangement are those who had previously used the third floor to study quietly because the books for their courses are shelved there. They feel that they are forced to study there regardless of noise levels rather than moving books to a quieter floor. We had not anticipated this reaction – rather we had thought extra shelving might be needed, as books were moved between floors.

We also sought advice from other universities re-examining the way they use their study space. Useful suggestions included having smaller group study tables and working with the student union on managing user behaviour. These ideas will feed into our decisions at the end of the pilot period.

Overall, student feedback has been positive despite some early negative comments, and the study areas have settled down well, with the majority of students respecting the different study zones. However, there have been significant issues with the third floor in terms of the amount of noise generated by group discussions and the students whose stock is located on that floor being reluctant to take their books to other areas for individual study. This has been partially solved by increasing the security patrols and encouraging groups to be aware of noise levels so the noise remains tolerable even for those students working individually. ☺

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