Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Transform Your Space, Transform Your Teaching:
Reflections on the UCBA Learning & Teaching Center

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Libraries often thrive on collaboration and partnerships when innovating and finding the resources to support new ideas. The 2013 opening of the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash (UCBA) Learning & Teaching Center (L&T Center) shared library space is an example of such a successful partnership. In addition, our experience shows working together across disciplines and departments to create new physical spaces can dramatically change the dynamics of the learning and teaching environment.

To understand how this shared space transformed our teaching, it is important to know that in the years leading up to the UCBA L&T Center opening, our library instruction program evolved from the historic bibliographic instruction-based in the training and effective use of research tools to a more concept-based teaching of information literacy. With this change, it quickly became clear to us that the traditional classrooms and computer labs would no longer support this more engaged, dynamic teaching style. We are all familiar with the traditional set-up that usually includes some combination of the following: rows of desks and/or desktop computers, instructor computer, projector screen, and dry-erase/chalkboard space. This room set-up allowed students to practice search mechanics (e.g., using a library database) during the class,

but it was a challenge to use active learning techniques (e.g., small teamwork). With the

curriculum that we teach and the limited time of our "one shot" library instruction sessions

scheduled for one class during the semester within a credit course (e.g., English Composition),

active learning is critical to engaging students in such a short period of time. In addition, active

learning in the library instruction curriculum, as it is in many other disciplines, gives students the

chance to directly apply concepts to the class research assignment. The physical challenges in the

classroom were not unique and most of us can relate to the scenario of teaching in a classroom

with inflexible furniture and limited technology. Would the students be able to access the dry-

erase boards/chalkboards? Can they move the desks or tables so they can work as a team? If

they can move the desks or tables, will we be able to reach the students to work with them or will

the room circulation be stymied? With these challenges, we had to be flexible with our teaching

plans and adjust, on the fly, during class sessions. Given these barriers and after discussions or

observations with library colleagues at other institutions, we believed a dedicated, flexible,

technology-enhanced library classroom could radically change how we teach information

literacy.

        Our next challenge was proposing a space exclusively for library instruction with campus

space at a premium. We had many local and national examples of dedicated library classrooms

including UC's Langsam Library and the neighboring Northern Kentucky University Steely

Library; however, most of these examples were located in much larger libraries. The UCBA

Faculty Learning & Teaching Center, also in need of a space more favorable to teaching and/or

hosting faculty development workshops, seemed a natural collaboration for our library given the

common goals of a flexible, technology-enhanced space. We also looked to a successful local

example of this kind of partnership with the UC Center for the Enhancement of Teaching &

Learning located in UC's Langsam Library. Fortunately, the opportunity to create this shared

space presented itself in 2010-2011 when our Dean began the renovation planning process for

the library and adjacent building spaces. At that point, we had already discussed the idea of a

shared space with the Faculty Learning & Teaching Center Co-Directors. As a result, we had a

strong case for efficiently addressing space needs and increasing overall engagement as well as

student learning and faculty development. From there, the Learning & Teaching Center space

went from vision to renovation concept design. Considering the needs of our unique situation

and the sacrifice of some general library space, this shared space moved forward as a successful

collaboration and ultimately, provided a great opportunity to innovate and get creative in our

library instruction classes and our teaching.

Having a flexible teaching space for library instruction has created numerous

opportunities for us to innovate and build in more engagement for students as they learn, practice

and apply information literacy concepts. We can now develop teaching plans that include a large

amount of group work and presentations where students can show off their work using the

SMART Board or one of the four, large dry-erase boards. Using these visual, public workspaces,

students can present their research findings and extend their ideas about the research process.

They can display their search strategies, team discussion notes, and even create timelines to

demonstrate how events can help shape the conversation on a given topic.

With 10 moveable trapezoid-shaped tables and 30 chairs, we have set the room up in a

variety of configurations to maximize student learning. We have used multiple arrangements of

tables for medium-size teams to brainstorm a hypothesis and find sources. Disconnecting the

tables to create smaller workspaces for think-pair-share activities on source type characteristics

has also worked well. For class presentations, we have connected all the tables in a U-shaped

style configuration so students can easily see the presenter(s) from any seat in the room. Having

fewer furniture restrictions also means we can use one of our favorite teaching strategies – the

gallery walk where students walk the room to review work by the other teams, similar to

attending a conference poster presentation. In addition, having a room equipped with laptops

means fewer wires so students can freely move between the board and tables and work on the

class activities wherever they want to in the room. The room's SMART Board's write, swipe,

and touch features has drawn ooh's and aah's from students and is a great tool to draw attention

during class discussions on specific research concepts such as highlighting author credentials or

talking about the structure of an online scholarly journal article.

Now that we have been in the UCBA Learning & Teaching Center room for several

years, we have refined and/or created more active learning opportunities in our teaching.

Considering how to best use the room's space has become a normal part of developing our

teaching plans. From activities such as matching source characteristic cards and brainstorming

strategies for evaluating information to following a conversation on a topic via tweets, articles,

and blogs, having a flexible space has created new and dynamic ways to make information

literacy more relatable (and more engaging) to students. From our perspective as librarian

instructors, it is fascinating to see students working together, learning from each other, and

making connections between research concepts and their own topics. In some classes, faculty

have even noted that one of the room's benefits is the opportunity for class teams to work

together (some for the first time) and get to know each other. Factoring in the physical space

while thinking about how students will engage with each other and the content continues to be

one of our primary goals in fostering a dynamic environment for the best student learning.

Finally, given that the Learning & Teaching Center space was the first of its kind at UC Blue

Ash College, its creation and use has even helped inform the design of new flexible, technology-

enhanced classrooms across campus.

Further Reading:

Mathews, B. (n.d.). 7 Classrooms: Library as Pedagogical Incubator [Blog post]. Retrieved August 27,

2018, from http://www.chronicle.com/blognetwork/theubiquitouslibrarian/2015/04/10/7-

classrooms-library-as-pedagogical-incubator/