

Up Cate

January/February 2007 Vol 6 (1-2)

THE STUDY CENTRE APPROACH

breaking the mould in Worcs

LARGE PRINT BOOKS

what the readers think

FIFTEEN HUNDRED YEARS

of libraries

GETTING PEOPLE TO JOIN

why is it hard?

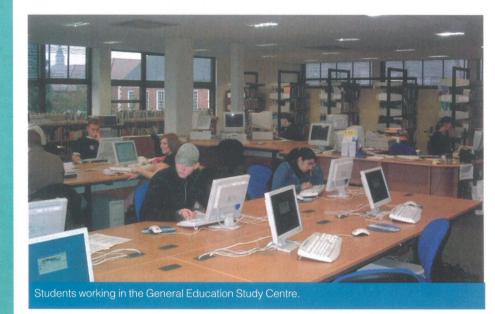
BREAKING BARRIERS

to safeguard sound in the British Library archive

I am Cataloguer,

hear me roar!

the study centre approach learning and teaching strategies. Most of our buildings consisted of a collection of small-sized rooms unsuitable as study centres and it was clear that some construction work would be needed. An output for program of conduct and way to learning is not so to



At an FE college in Worcester, the traditional library has been replaced by study centres with a significant increase in staff, in a move to focus on the learner, report Kate Gardner and colleagues. How did this radical change go down with the students, the staff and the teachers?

n 2002 Worcester College of Technology looked successful. It was financially sound and enjoying satisfactory recruitment, and, in the previous year, an inspection by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC)¹ judged the audited curriculum areas and five areas of cross-college

provision either 'good' or 'satisfactory'.

The executive and the governing body were, however, concerned that retention and achievement were falling short of the highest standard in some curriculum areas. These concerns had been raised both by local quality-reporting mechanisms and by the FEFC report, which also criticised the library as being too small and in need of refurbishment.

Worcester is a general further education college with approximately 12,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) FE students and 2,500 FTE non-FE students (including nearly 1,000 FTE 14-16 year-olds and approximately 600 FTE higher education students). The campus consists of predominately 1960s buildings, with little room for expansion. Most of the buildings are clustered in the city centre but some are more than one mile from this central cluster.

As part of a package of measures designed to tackle poor retention and achievement, it was decided to look at replacing the existing conventional library and drop-in PC provision with a number of distributed, curriculum-based study centres, each containing ILT equipment, teaching and learning space, learning resources, and access to both academic and learning support staff.

This decision was championed by a new college Principal, who believed this approach could change the existing culture of the college from one based on teaching to one based on learning. The approach had been seen as successful at Somerset College of Arts & Technology (SCAT)² and South East Essex College (SEEC).³ We were also reassured by the college's experience of operating a language centre consisting of language laboratories, books, computers and a seminar room.

Initial fact-finding focused on the two colleges which had successfully introduced this type of facility. The Principal of SEEC visited Worcester and talked to governors and staff about their experience. This visit also raised the awareness of both governors and

Our research had confirmed the success reported by SCAT and a visit was arranged in June 2003 for some members of the executive and the college librarian. The party visited four large integrated learning centres, each staffed by a mixed multi-func-tional team of support and academic staff. What impressed the visiting team was the extent to which students were working purposefully, how the mixed teams of staff in each centre were working well together and a feeling that real learning was taking place.

The fact-finding process reinforced our belief that the introduction of study centres could improve the overall success rates of students, and provide an effective learning environment that would meet a wide range of learning styles and support innovatory

6 (1-2) January/February 2007

construction work would be needed. An architectural feasibility study, funded by the Learning & Skills Council, was carried out by a national firm of architects to see if and how the buildings could be adapted.

The decision to go ahead with the study centres was taken by the college corporation in autumn 2003. The reaction from staff was not entirely positive. Some teaching staff felt uncomfortable at the thought of teaching in large open spaces, saw the proposed change as a plot to cut guided learning hours and feared that library staff would take over their role. Some library staff clearly had not yet been won over and could not visualise successful academic endeavour without a library. A visit to SCAT by teaching, library and support staff was arranged in spring 2004 and this led to a much more positive attitude towards the planned development.

Pedagogic drivers

It is widely understood that students learn best when constructing their own knowledge and understanding,4 in a social environment.⁵ We also believe that the understanding of a concept and the level of understanding of a concept and the level of thider-standing develop faster when learners have to explain something to other people. Study centres enable students to support and learn from each other, while presenting them with formal and informal situations in which they interact with concepts and knowledge, and articulate their understanding. Since individuals learn in different ways, even those studying for the same qualification need access to knowledge at different rates and at times appropriate to their existing stage of progress. Current levels of technology can provide learners with wide flex-ibility in accessing knowledge. The study centres allow students to become autono-

Study centres present a different environment, in which students attend formal teaching, study on their own or access oneto-one sessions for additional support. We believe students in many colleges are only vaguely aware of the work that staff and other students undertake to support what are often large organisations and workplaces. In study centres, they can see staff and other students carrying out their work or studies. They can interact with other students of different abilities, or at different stages in their education or lives. This open style reinforces the concept that learning needs to be planned, people need to work together, work needs to be organised and documented and that managers need to supervise and observe. It helps students to understand their own responsibilities for managing and planning their own learning and for conforming to social norms, codes of conduct and ways of working.

It is important to stress that this approach to learning is not seen as 'cost-cutting'. It is not about reducing the guided learning hours for programmes of study nor is it about reducing the impact of teachers facilitating learning. It is dependent upon the collaboration of teachers and study centre staff to provide the best possible learning activities to encourage students in successful academic achievement.

Phased implementation necessary

In September 2003, WCT received approval from the Learning & Skills Council to begin a £6m refurbishment plan, which included the development of eight curriculum-spe-cific study centres. A body of respected advice existed, e.g. from UFI, which encouraged us to aim for an immediate full implementation. However, it was decided to adopt a phased implementation because we needed to provide a service for students during refurbishment and we also did not have enough staff or financial resources to go for full implementation. Early use of the centres was compromised by the need to provide open access for students from other curriculum areas during the refurbishment

The first new study centre opened in Easter 2004 in a newly acquired former police station. More specifically, the centre for the use of Law students – was created in what was the old court room. The develop-ment benefited from Centre of Vocational Excellence funding and was the only centre designed and fitted out by a firm of library suppliers. Not surprisingly this centre, complete with wireless laptops and purpose-built furniture, has become the college's showpiece centre.

Valuable lessons were learnt from this centre, reinforcing the need to have a flexible design, for both short-term effectiveness and future proofing. Ten further study centres have now opened. Notable features of these are the shell from an ex-BAC111 airplane in the Travel & Tourism Study Centre in which to deliver cabin crew training) and the dance floor and music practice rooms equipped with keyboards, drum kits and guitars in the Music Technology & Performing Arts Centre.

Limits of using existing buildings Adapting existing buildings to accommodate distributed study centres presented different challenges to building new. Existing infra-structure inhibited the inspirational and motivational design you see, for instance, in new-build learning spaces illustrated in Jisc's Designing Spaces for Effective Learning, and also placed constraints on the size and layout of study centres. This resulted in their design not always being ideal. Motivational features such as airplane shells and musical equipment compensate to some extent.

Characteristics of study centres

- Group and team activities where learners can easily interact with each other but focus on their own group and activities.
- High levels of access to ILT.
- Use of written materials and worksheets for learners for the efficient presentation of concepts, thinking and knowledge, instead of whiteboards and/ or methods that rely on copying or simple transmission.
- Environments that replicate typical workplaces - managers, teachers, learning support staff, 14-18 and 19+ year-old students carrying out their work together. This reinforces productive attitudes to work, lifelong learning and social inclusion and the concept that achievement of any goal results from social collaboration on many levels.
- Higher attention spans and levels of good behaviour by students, and productive staff-student relationships.
- Reflective and innovative teachers who have developed new skills, supported and monitored by their peers and man-
- Activities where teachers are constantly involved rather than passively supervising their students' work.

feature feature



The college believes that a critical factor in determining a particular study centre's effectiveness is its proximity to the associated teaching space and lecturer accommodation. Although it was possible to accommodate these clusters in the same building, the lack of suitable rooms meant some compromises had to be accepted. A radical reorganisation of college accommodation would have been needed to achieve the desired proximity.

Staffing increase

The transition to study centres has resulted in a significant increase in staffing (28 instead of 10). Healthy numbers applying for these posts enabled staff with appropriate subject experience to be appointed and this, we believe, contributed to the positive responses in a survey carried out this year. 7 In this, 75 per cent of 459 students completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement 'Can ask study centre staff for help with my coursework/studies'. This view is consistent with a recent SWOT analysis carried out by Study Centre Assistants which identified as strengths 'Staff skills and expertise' and the 'Customer focus' of study centre staff, further supported by the view of an HND Law student that centre staff were 'very helpful'.

The majority of existing library staff successfully applied for posts in the study centres, although three unqualified staff decided this brave new world was not for them. One of these has since had a change of mind and successfully applied for a Study Centre Assistant's post that became available. The commitment of the college executive to the study centres concept was confirmed by the involvement of the Principal in all the original interviews for both Senior and Study Centre Assistants.

Management of individual study centres is primarily the responsibility of a Senior Study Centre Assistant, although academic departments timetable taught sessions within the centre, and regular liaison meetings enable academics to contribute to major decision-making (e.g. opening hours). The 2001 FEFC inspection found good liaison between library and academic staff. On the whole, staff work constructively together, although there have been issues relating to ownership and communication. The success of the study centres and the pressured

environment in a successful FE college have led to instances where academics have made decisions on the use of study centre facilities without going through the proper channels and procedures. Part of the reason for this may be the remoteness of some staffrooms from some study centres but it is probably more to do with ownership. Teaching staff value and want to use the study centres for a wide variety of activities.

Multi-disciplinary teams work in each study centre and are expected to help students in any appropriate way. This includes checking students into and out of the centres; individual and group learner support; information literacy training; learning styles analysis; issuing books; materials creation on a virtual learning environment. This represents a significant change in role for 'shopfloor' library staff, similar to the emergent role of HE LIS staff proposed in Ward.

Achieving consistency

There were concerns among the study centre staff that the distributed nature of the centres could lead to an inconsistent approach. So a number of cross-centre working parties and activities were devised. A collective staff development meeting is now held once a week, with minimal staffing in the centres. Originally these meetings were an hour long and involved the closure of all study centres, but this was scaled down in the face of protests from users. These all-together sessions are invaluable and involve a variety of activities and training. Additionally, Senior Study Centre Assistants meet as a group at least once a month, and cross-centre groups meet on an ad hoc basis to examine and analyse topics such as evaluation, induction and marketing.

Although a specific member of staff is based in a particular centre, all study centre staff are employed as learning resources staff and so can be and are asked to provide cover when needed in other centres. This has the added advantage that staff have the opportunity to experience practice in other study centres.

between library and academic staff. On the whole, staff work constructively together, although there have been issues relating to ownership and communication. The success of the study centres and the pressured

room of the Management Study Centre; A tutor and students in the Languages Study Centre; Students using the Apple computers and music keyboard in the Music Technology Study Centre.

he Management Study
Centre: The Health Study

entre: Staff development

locations. People-handling skills are of crucial importance. This new role also places much greater emphasis on pedagogic issues and liaison with other members of the college management team.

After one full year of operation, student success rates improved. At Level 1 there was year-on-year improvements for 19+ students, with 16-18 students scoring above the national averages for all long courses. At Level 2 there were year-on-year improvements for both age groups. At Level 3 twoyear-long programmes showed improvement in year 1; we believe the impact of study centres will be greater after all Level 3 have experienced the study centre environment. National Vocational Qualifications improved by nine per cent points above the national average, and the 19+ age group improved by 12 per cent points above the national average in 2005.

We believe our study centres improved learning, in contrast to the less confident views expressed in Roberts. ¹⁰ The college has received a number of complimentary observations from visiting senior FE managers: 'We were inspired as a result'; 'Purposeful buzz from happy students'.

As expected, the impact on the delivery of curriculum varies between study centres. Within some departments, the study centres have supported a significant change in curriculum delivery. Generally, during timetabled sessions in these centres, students meet briefly with their lecturer in a breakout room and then work individually or collaboratively in the main body of the centre

on a series of tasks that support 'intended learning outcome' achievement. These tasks and supporting learning resources are often accessed via the college's VLE. Further support is offered by the lecturer and, pleasingly, also by the centre staff. This model of staffing by both lecturers and centre staff is similar to that reported at SEEC.¹¹

Study centre staff have been encouraged by the industrious attitude of students: 'This encourages students to take responsibility for their own behaviour as they would in the workplace'; 'The open-plan style of study centres, the fact that purposeful discussion is encouraged and the use of large tables facilitate group activity and communication.'

Staff in a department that focuses predominately on traditional courses have generally adopted a more conservative approach to the study centres. In line with college policy, all their courses have slots timetabled in the study centres; however, there is a tendency for lecturers to use breakout rooms as traditional classrooms for the whole of the timetabled slot. When the main body of the study centre is used in sessions, study centre staff are generally less likely to be encouraged by the academic staff to support students.

Reasons for this reluctance to change may include the age profile of lecturers, embedded teaching practice, the vocational emphasis of curriculum, and the range of students. We are convinced that change will

occur as the use of the VLE develops and as teaching staff have more opportunity to observe good practice in other departments

Data from the 2006 survey supports our view that students both enjoy and make constructive use of the study centres:

- 80 per cent of 451 students completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement 'I like using the study centres'
- ■81 per cent of 477 students completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement 'Study centres help me work on my own'.

Problems of success

Some 69 per cent of students use the study centres outside classes. However, there is clearly potential to increase this, as 19 per cent of students stated they were unable to use the study centres when they needed to and nine per cent of students did not realise that they could use any study centre. Pressures from an overstretched campus and from the enthusiasm of some academic staff for the centres have resulted in the centres being heavily used for timetabled sessions. This has meant the study centre resources have often not been available for drop-in use by students, a problem identified by students in focus groups and by Study Centre Assistants in a recent SWOT analysis exercise. We are trying to increase the number, size and flexibility of study centres and to encourage students to use other study centres at busy

The use of laptops in centres is popular with students, enabling them to make more flexible use of the space. The intention is to replace more fixed PCs with laptops as funds permit. But at the same time we will have to look at the problem of limited laptop battery-life. All HE students now receive an individual laptop free of charge for the duration of their course.

We believe study centres can contribute further to student learning. We envisage a scenario in which academic staff are more readily available in study centres outside timetabled slots to support the work of students. This may mean a radical reorganisation of the college's accommodation in order to achieve the required proximity of academic staffrooms to the study centres.

Existing infrastructure was successfully adapted to accommodate curriculum-based

study centres but we believe that more effective accommodation can be achieved in a new building, because motivational and inspirational design concepts can be used. Whatever the scenario, however, it is essential that flexibility is incorporated into the design.

The vast majority of library staff can not only adapt to the new roles and responsibilities required in study centres, but also relish the challenge and opportunities offered. The majority of academic staff will adopt the good practice needed to get the most out of the centres. Some who prefer traditional teaching may need encouragement in order to adapt their approach. However, most importantly, students thrive and develop in this learning environment.

References

- Worcester College of Technology: Report from the Inspectorate 2000-01. FEFC, 2001.
- 2 Assessment of the Impact of the Development of Integrated Learning Centres. Quality Improvement Agency, 2002 (http://www.s4s.prg.ukl).
- 3 Space to Learn. FERL, 2003 (http://ferl.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=6322).
- **4** J. Biggs. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Open University Press, 2003.
- 5 The Learning Process in 2020 Task Force. *Point and Click: learners in the ICT driving seat.* Foresight, 2000 (www.foresight. gov.uk/default1024ns.htm).
- 6 Design for Learning: a design guide for people who run learning centres. Ufi, 2003 (www.ufi.com/designforlearning).
- 7 Designing Spaces for Effective Learning. HEFCE. Jisc, 2006.
- 8 Survey. QDP Services, 2005 (www.qdpservices.co.uk).
- 9 Ward. 'The Student Experience.' In: E Oyston (ed.), Centred on Learning: academic case studies on learning centre development. Ashgate, 2003, pp.97-125.
- 10 Roberts. 'Do Libraries Aid Learning? Approaches and methods for measuring impact.' Sconul Newsletter 28, Spring 2003, pp.87-88.
- 11 See 7

Kate Gardner (kgardner@staff.wortech.
ac.uk), left in picture, is Head of Library and
Study Centres and Dr Patricia Woolford is
Vice Principal — Quality and Student Support
Services at Worcester College of Technology,
John Colvin is a Teaching Fellow and Senior
Lecturer in Computing at the University of
Worcester.



38 | update 6(1-2) January/February 2007 6(1-2) January/February 2007