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Meeting at the Crossroads - An Academic Report from the Next Generation Learning Space Seminar

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Keywords: teaching and learning spaces, knowledge acquisition, creative learning, library

Introduction

On the 11th October 2017, a Next Generation Learning Space (NGLS) Seminar organised by Mr Tom O'Mara and the Instructional Design team was held in the Creative Zone, Boole Library, University College Cork (UCC). The Seminar was a follow up to a successful event initially held in October 2016. Also, NGLS was associated with an open call for the establishment or redesign of pilot learning spaces at UCC.

The seminar was a continuation of ongoing formal and informal discussions happening across UCC for some time. That campus-wide conversation revolved around an influence of space on learning and more generally on pedagogy. It was an opportunity for all of those involved in the discussion for an interdisciplinary meeting. Also, it can be treated as reconvening of an academic dialogue around the importance of the physical presence of teaching and learning spaces in general and at UCC specifically.

Context

To place the seminar into the right context, it is important to mention that nowadays teaching and learning spaces are being recognised as an essential and indispensable element in the process of knowledge acquisition (and as important as the acquired knowledge itself). Currently,

quite fortunately, academia recovers from the one-sided view focusing only on one side of the knowledge acquisition process, i.e. teaching. We are shifting away from the over-represented teachers' perspective paradigm into a more balanced and inclusive one where all the involved parties are treated as equals to one another. Students, their views, and experiences are as relevant as the ones presented by their teachers. Such an approach might seem as taken for granted these days. Undoubtedly, the NGLS Seminar was held in a framework where teaching and learning spaces are recognised due to their importance in the mentioned process of knowledge acquisition.

Speakers

In the light of this approach, the mentioned Seminar was also showcasing some of the developments of solutions and ideas implemented both at UCC and elsewhere.

In the seminar opening speech, Professor John O'Halloran, the then Vice-President for Teaching & Learning at UCC, paid attention to a current UCC development, i.e., the student-centred Student Hub building which is under construction in the heart of the UCC campus. The prominence of the Hub was highlighted on other occasions during the seminar due to its key location (in relation to other campus facilities), and also, due to the centrality of student-focused facilities to-be-housed in the Student Hub and which are currently scattered around the fringes of the UCC campus.

Subsequently, Professor Stephen Heppell delivered an inspiring talk on *Building better Learning, Learning better Building* briefly outlining and showcasing the current developments in the creative pedagogy and space; and which also set the tone for a reminder of the seminar. It was an exemplification of the teaching spaces which are being introduced having in mind the users, the learners. On that note, it is worth mentioning that Prof. Heppell emphasised the importance of

designing learning spaces together, and in cooperation, with the learners themselves. As otherwise, such a task is meaningless.

The succeeding talk *Bridging gaps between Pedagogy, Technology and Space* which were co-delivered by representatives from UCC Buildings and Estates Mr Mark Poland & Mr Michael O'Sullivan circled back to, and expanded on, the initial remarks by Prof. O'Halloran discussing all of the on-going and planned developments of learning spaces on and around UCC campus.

The following presentation *The Libraries of the Future* was delivered by Ms Colette McKenna, the Director of Library Services at UCC, and was discussing some of the possible directions of the evolution of library spaces. One of the main points was the importance of staying open to any of the soon-to-be-revealed changes in the physical and mental landscape around us. These changes, it was being emphasised by Ms McKenna, are especially vital when it comes to designing and redeveloping library as a shared space for, and with having in mind, an academic and non-academic community. As such, we must be prepared to accept and brace the change in order to shape the library spaces in accordance, and in response to, the current needs of the library users.

The second last talk delivered by Dr Mike Cosgrave called *Bricks & Models: locating learning in physical and metaphorical spaces* was focused on the importance of physicality of the space and an impact it has on students and teachers. It was highlighting that contemporary theorists often forget about the importance and impact of the physicality of space on the digital side of the knowledge acquisition. Also, when discussing the technological advancement of the teaching and learning space, Dr Cosgrave warned listeners of the possibility of being caught in the University trends to introduce innovative learning spaces without assessing the real needs of these learning units. It is merely because there is a pressure placed on Universities by the public

"not to stay behind" and to deliver those facilities to their students. It was being said that, a process of designing a space should be an opportunity to bridge the past and present, and not only, to simply combine the newly invented or trending digital tools with some elements of the learning process. Having said that, we should already be learning from past mistakes, no matter how recent these are, as the relationship between technology and pedagogy is not new and for Dr Cosgrave started around 1992.

The last talk of the day was by Dr Dan Blackshields called *'Now Why Didn't We Think of That!' The Developmental Imperative of 'Space' and 'Pedagogy' Going on a Deep Dive Learning Journey*. It was discussing the importance of complementarity of all the components of the teaching and learning process. By using a metaphor of a hand, it was mentioned that one finger could perform tasks separately from other fingers. Similarly, fingers of one hand can be viewed as having distinct roles in relation to one another, but in the end must always unite and cooperate in order to perform complex and challenging tasks like, here, teaching and learning.

It is important to mention that all of the talks of the day created a quite harmonious whole. Similarly, all these talks together added an edge to future discussions in the months to come around innovative spaces and pedagogy. Also, the first and the last talk of the day were paradoxically somewhat complementary towards one another and tied the entire event together, even though they originated from two distinct standpoints. The first one, by Prof. Heppell emphasised attention to details as crucial in delivering of objectives and having a proposed impact on teaching and learning. It was being said that spaces and buildings are never finished. Those should be treated as ongoing projects always ready to be revisited in the future pending of changing teaching and learning needs. Whereas, Dr Blackshields was emphasising the importance of not allowing oneself to be caught up in perfectionism, as life and its social constructs are, in essence, not at all perfect.

Considering that, the only possibility is to stay in a constant cycle of pursuing an unachievable version of excellence by just trying and failing. Having said that, both talks by Prof. Heppell and Dr Blackshields met in the end at the crossroads of the perpetuity of processes leading to, and focusing on, teaching and learning,

Conclusions

This seminar was a space in its own right facilitating discussions between different stakeholders on the importance of the connections between the design of spaces and pedagogy. It was happening in the local context of the changes initiated and facilitated in cooperation between different divisions of UCC (the Office of the Vice-President for Teaching & Learning; Buildings and Estates; relevant discipline-specific departments and community stakeholders). Having in mind redevelopments of currently available and to-be-designed learning spaces at UCC and elsewhere, several other important points have been raised, i.e. the importance of physicality in the process of knowledge acquisition especially considering a disassociation from space in which learning is happening. More globally the NGLS seminar was placed in the context of the shift in the way we approach designing learning spaces in academia nowadays. The NGLS seminar as a whole was a reminder to academics, students, professionals, and other relevant parties of how vital incorporation and blending of theory and practice is to thoughtful design and incorporation of learning spaces.