Hub Central: Utilising co-created ‘space design’ to foster a sense of belonging across diverse First Year student groups

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Abstract
Hub Central is an area of 10,500 square metres that has built its own unique community that embraces diverse interaction and supports the first year experience. Students were used in the co-creation of a space that has been designed to promote academic achievement by enhancing the student experience. By reflecting on their own needs, roles and contributions, a space has been delivered that is multifunctional, allows repurposing and fosters students developing their own approaches to interaction. A space largely with a philosophy of self management by students and filled with staff that are student centric has resulted in a community with an overall heightened sense of awareness and empathy towards the goals of their peers. The Hub includes 11 bookable student project rooms, 13 student projects booths, 290 fixed student computers, training rooms, Wi-Fi, a student kitchen, 3 commercial food outlets, a general store, the Maths Learning, PASS and Writing Centres and Student and IT Support Services operating extended hours (8am to 10pm weekdays, 10am to 5pm weekends). The collocation of all this has provided a greater feeling of belonging and encouraged the students to interact in diverse groups beyond the classroom.

The paper aims to provide real world examples to encourage discussion of how ‘space’ can be designed and utilised for fostering a sense of belonging for first year students.

Introduction: Hub Central – Why this Space?

In postulating attributes, and exploring good practices in supporting positive outcomes for first year students at university, our practice in the workplace is guided by a number of conceptual models of ‘impact’ (e.g., Tinto, 1999; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella, 1985; Weidman, 1989). These models assert that the impact of university on nearly any student outcome is the result of multiple influences. At a minimum, these multiple influences include: student demographic and pre-college characteristics; organizational or structural characteristics of the institution attended; students’ academic experiences; and, students’ non-academic experiences. It is asserted that a positive academic outcome for students is the result of providing best practice in support in a combination of these characteristics. If we look at these models within current models of best practice in learning space design we have the ability to explore some new approaches.

In describing Hub Central as a ‘space’ we can use the framework provided by Souter, Riddle, Keppell, & Sellers(2010). They have developed a model that proposes seven principals of learning space design which support a constructivist approach to learning and support a learning environment that is student centred, collaborative and experiential. Milne (2006) has applied this framework to model the student experience and how it relates to space.
Hub Central – Your Space! Hub Central is a vibrant and engaging learning community and offers first year students greater motivation and reward for their use of the space. Brown & Katz (2009) encourage designers and leaders to broaden their design process, by using them to make strategic decisions and consider relationships between people and the experience behind products and services. They argue that design thinking processes need to be human centred, iterative processes that operate in the spaces of ideation, inspiration, and implementation, only constrained by desirability, feasibility, and viability. They assert designers need to apply their skills to social problems and for educational systems to preserve creativity.

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, (2005) attributed student engagement to student persistence and participation in learning and social activities, which in turn is argued to be strengthened when institutional resources and values are directed to enriching the educational experience of students.

Focus groups in with student users have suggested the hub is lot of different thing to different people or at different times of the year. It is a comfortable environment for exploring and sharing; a link between the physical boundaries of the classroom and the new virtual boundaries of technology; a space that encourages knowledge generation by students or the
active construction of knowledge by the learner; a space that enhances, motivates and promotes authentic learning interactions; and, a threat to ‘traditional’ teaching approaches and methods (like the book was to the slate)

Through all the discussions and consultations and with the co-creation process being a new framework in decision making for the University, the outcomes of the Hub project bring you back to a familiar piece of research. Chickering & Gamson, (1987) classic work on principles for good practice in undergraduate education informed readers that the qualities a good educational environment must have are: 1) a strong sense of shared purposes; 2) concrete support from administrators and faculty leaders for those purposes; 3) adequate funding appropriate for the purposes; 4) policies and procedures consistent with the purposes; and 5) continuing examination of how well the purposes are being achieved.

Figure 4. Level 4 Hub Central. student project booths and digital media show computer availability and promote services and activities.

Hub Central has produced a student centric environment that has many benefits for both student and staff. The space has created opportunities for students, academic and professional staff to celebrate and reflect on their shared purposes. It demonstrates that a physical space can facilitate student engagement by providing a connectedness for students, to each other, with staff and with the University. When looking at how we have developed the space we can use the theoretical framework provided by Souter, et al (2010). When we explore Souters seven principals at Hub Central, ethnographic methodologies provide valuable insight into the application of the framework, specifically highlighting the relationship between the space, use and student interaction.

Figure 5: Occupancy Head Counts. Afternoons First 4 weeks of October comparison 2011 to 2013.
1. **Comfort:** Hub Central is a space which creates a physical and mental sense of ease and well-being. The Hub has well-designed learning spaces and enabling technologies that encourage students to spend more time on campus, increasing engagement and improving retention. Students indicate there is a learning value from bumping into someone at the Hub and having a casual conversation. Figure 5 provides an example of how many people are in the space in the afternoons. Data is collected for 11am, 3pm, midnight and 4am. Mornings peak at around 1090, afternoons just over 1100, midnight up to 200 and 4am peak at around 60 users.

2. **Aesthetics:** Students suggest Hub Central is pleasurable as it has recognition of symmetry, harmony, simplicity and fitness for purpose. It is a space that enhances, motivates and promotes authentic learning interactions and student users are exhibiting a freedom to be creative and actively engaged to continue the learning process outside the formal teaching settings.

3. **Flow:** Hub Central provides a space to experience the ‘flow’, a state of mind felt by the learner when totally involved in the learning experience. A sense of shared experience around learning is a powerful aspect of the Hub community. Barker (1979) said “A sense of place must be all things for all people, and yet it must be a unique quantity of ‘stuff’ that only exists in one spot.”

4. **Equity:** Hub Central provides for the needs of cultural and physical differences. The Hub demonstrates the value from providing an assessable space for all students to have discussions, reflections, conversations and interactions using many different approaches or media. The Hub has enabled an understanding and acceptance of the interconnectedness of students and services on campus.

5. **Blending:** Hub Central Maths and Writing Centres Services are an example of a mixture of technological and face-to-face pedagogical resources in a learning space design that seeks to provide freedom of access and interaction with peers. The Hub is a space that facilitates the acquisition of knowledge between the tradition and virtual learning spaces. Hub Central has computer and networking technologies that once might have appeared exotic (pervasive wireless networking, iPods, smart phones) or transformative are now considered mainstream by our students.
6. **Affordances:** Hub Central delivers the ‘action possibilities’ in the learning environment. It provides the students kitchens, dining areas, shops, natural light, Wi-Fi, private spaces, project rooms, relaxation spots, writing surfaces, sofas, and so on. Despite multiple design possibilities and uses of the space at Hub Central, there is an overarching desired outcome to enrich learning.

7. **Repurposing:** Hub Central has the potential for multiple uses of most space. Different weeks require different space to suit the learning needs at that time – Hub Central is a space that is adaptable. The Hub demonstrates that there is an acknowledgement at the University that flexibility no longer is filling rooms with as many chairs as will fit.

**Questions for discussion.**

1. Does Co-Creation between Students and Senior Management work towards supporting the first year experience?
2. Investing in space or investing in programs, how to find the right balance?
3. Is self-regulation a way to engage and create ownership or a way to save money?

**References**


