

Learning Principles

Designing a learning space for SMEs



Introduction

This paper investigates the design of learning spaces used by training providers that are supported by learndirect scotland and who work with small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

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An SME is a company that employs 250 people or less, and more than 90 per cent of SMEs employ 10 people or less.

Little is known about the relationship between the environment and learning. However, there is growing interest in this area and educators throughout Scotland are investing in learning spaces where the design is used as part of the overall learning toolkit.

In addition to the benefits a good design may bring to a learner, it is believed that a well-designed space can be a significant influence when learners are choosing their learning location. This is a major factor in an increasingly competitive environment.

A recent report by Alexi Marmott Associates (AMA) on learning environments within further education states: *"In the further education sector it is held that 'excellent design has the capacity to enrich the learning experience, to raise the aspirations of teachers and learners and help education and training to flourish.'"*

We have worked in the further and higher education sector for six years and have also conducted research-based design in schools. Our experience with workplace learning was more limited, so we were interested to find out what specific needs of SME clients.

While researching this paper, we visited five learning centres, in Glasgow, Paisley, Perth, Dundee and the Borders, and interviewed 13 trainers, tutors and learndirect scotland staff. We found that learning centres that work with SME clients deal with a range of training needs and activities, from basic IT skills to workshop-based or practical activities.

How does a learning centre work with SMEs?

To get a better understanding of the centres' requirements we began by asking some general questions such as:

- how do you approach SME clients?
- what kinds of activities do you undertake?
- what are the biggest problems you face?

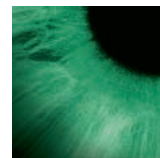
There was an even split between e-learning, IT-based activities and more practical hand-on work among the trainers we interviewed.

Each centre has its own way of marketing its product and, as with most things, a recommendation by one SME client to another was viewed as the strongest marketing tool. This can be a problem when a learning centre is just starting out and most seem to prefer an in-house sales team.

Getting employers to commit time and money to employee training was seen as the most significant problem faced by learning centres.

"Clients can find it hard to fit it in to their day, they are busy people and things come up. It's not the resources, it is the time that is in fact the biggest problem."

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Some centres found that selling their services also posed a problem. The literature can often be complex and employers can be confused about exactly what the offer is. As a result, most trainers stressed the importance of a personal approach.

"It's so important because companies don't read what we send out to them. In a face-to-face over a coffee we can personally figure out the needs they didn't know they had or answers they didn't realise that we provided."

Trainers also felt that many employees are still concerned or unsure of IT and this can be a barrier. *"In theory, the internet is great but the technology is hard if you're not used to it. Also it is not updated as quickly as it should be."*

The types of space that trainers use vary, from a base of operations for those who work exclusively from within the workplace to fully-equipped learning spaces.

For trainers who are working with PC or internet-based activities, hired rooms in a larger building in a business centre or industrial estate seems to be a popular solution. Most of these trainers have one small, dedicated space, with access to other rooms.

Access to other spaces in the building, such as larger training rooms, lounge spaces and cafeterias are important. This allows the centre to be flexible and take on larger groups of learners if and give learners a place to relax and talk.

Although the centres that we visited were very different, most trainers prefer to go to the client's workplace, depending on the type of activity. If the client has a job specific or equipment-specific problem, for example, trainers prefer to deal with this on site.

Several drawbacks to this approach were noted:

- using learners' own machines for training can cause logistical problems
- the workplace may not have the correct equipment, or may have out of date equipment
- learners can be disturbed by other members of staff or telephones while at their own desks
- learners are tense in the workplace and may not feel secure enough to discuss difficult subjects.

In one interesting case at Dundee College, the trainers tackled IT issues by using a mobile learning centre, which was taken into the business premises. This includes laptops, projectors, screens and other presentation equipment. The mobile centre allowed the providers to set up anywhere within the premises and carry out training.

In most cases, the trainers we spoke to felt that it was important to identify separate space in the workplace where staff can train undisturbed by telephone calls or co-workers. This helps to tackle privacy issues and makes learners more comfortable. Popular areas included boardrooms, meeting rooms and canteens.

"There are many small companies that don't have the dedicated equipment or the office layout isn't suitable, so we can take this mobile learning centre out and set it up in their premises. It's a hugely flexible tool that helps us to work with SMEs. Their office layouts may make training difficult, but if they have a room like a staff canteen we can set up the mobile learning centre, it just makes it so much easier."

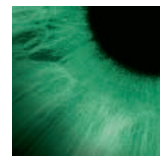
What are the best conditions for training?

Many trainers stressed that, for clients who do go to the learning centre, the conditions should be relaxing and not intimidating. Clients can be very tense for many reasons. It may be the first time that they have been in an educational setting for a number of years. Perhaps they did not enjoy school and do not relish the prospect of being in a classroom. They may also be completely new to IT and intimidated by it.

Throughout our discussions, trainers underlined the importance of a non-institutional setting when dealing with adult learners. To achieve this, many trainers avoid the traditional classroom set up and use breakout spaces or separate rooms where people can take a break.

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Closely linked to this idea is the use of catering facilities, which training providers believe creates a personal touch and makes their service memorable while adding an important social dimension to learning.

“Learning centre isn’t the image people have in their minds any more. We’re not about desks and walls and teachers at the front of the class. People don’t want to go to that environment.”

Other trainers stressed the importance of a quiet space, whether in the office or at the learning centre, where learners would not be interrupted. Environmental conditions, such as good or natural lighting and temperature control, are also considered important.

In our design research, we often acknowledge that the identity of an educational unit can make a critical difference in a client’s choice of learning provider. We asked the centres that we visited about their identity.

“I think that the fact that we are government funded makes people interested and they realise that qualifications are achievable. I think that people are interested in getting their staff better trained with legitimate bits of paper.”

Most trainers we spoke to viewed a professional yet approachable identity as desirable. This manifested itself in both personal approach and the appearance of the centre and its location. learndirect scotland branding was seen as an important tool in creating this professional identity by adding credibility.

Many providers felt that flexibility was an important aspect of identity for the business community, stressing that training can be done at the clients’ convenience and be adapted to their specific needs.

The types of technology used are as varied as the training on offer. For the most part, trainers use IT equipment and laptops are seen as a positive tool in breaking down barriers for less experienced learners and those with learning difficulties. A smaller percentage of trainers viewed visual tools such as projector screens and pictorial handouts as positive.

“Laptops totally. Mostly people are completely IT literate but might not have the access to the equipment. Also, I find it is helping with confidence for people who might not be so exposed to the technology because it is a more relaxed working environment.”

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What makes a good learning centre environment?

As this is a newly evolving area of interest to educators, there is little empirical data to support a link between successful learning and the environment. In addition, the impact of design alone on the learning experience is difficult to investigate in isolation of other factors that change when a new environment is created.

However, it is clear from the views of an increasing number of bodies that the environment can be a positive tool within the learning experience. A Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) publication stated: *“Well-designed social spaces are likely to increase students’ motivation and may even have an impact on their ability to learn.”*²

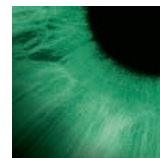
A previous JISC publication suggested that a well-designed environment may influence the learner’s choice of learning location. *“Organisations all face pressure to deliver higher standards of education, to greater numbers of students, with tight financial restrictions, but still need to provide facilities that will attract students to a competitive market.”*³

The role of the entrance

Most of the centres we visited were located within larger buildings. While this created a professional identity, lack of clear signage and basic navigational aids caused significant problems in locating the centres. Creating a presence for a learning centre is always important. When using a unit within a larger structure it becomes even more critical that learners can locate the space with ease.

“A learner’s journey begins before they even go through the door. You need to have clear and understandable signs outside your centre to let people know who you are and where you are.” University for Industry (Ufi).³

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Types of teaching and learning spaces

The design of your space need not be high-tech or expensive. The most important lesson that we as designers have learned is that people work in different ways. Many of the trainers we spoke to discussed the numerous ways in which people learn and how this relates to the spaces they use and the courses that they teach.

"People like interaction in the group but also to have someone leading. There is less motivation if left to one's own devices. A big part of our teaching success is the face-to-face interaction."

It is now widely understood that we all learn differently, in different ways and at different paces. Honey and Mumford⁴ identified four distinct styles of learners:

Activists: like to have a go, or try things out. They are usually open minded and flexible and want to get 'stuck in'. They enjoy learning that is fun and which challenges them. They do not take kindly to being talked at.

Pragmatists: are planners and are usually practical and down to earth. They like to test things out and to see for themselves how things come together. They like to get the background knowledge and theory and then apply it.

Theorists: logical thinkers, they like models and systems which explain processes. They will question situations and will not be easily put off if they are determined to find the answer. They are disciplined and will work things through to a logical conclusion.

Reflectors: cautious and careful, they are thoughtful and unlikely to rush at applying new approaches without them being properly tried and tested. They rarely jump to conclusions and enjoy listening to others.

Ufl has identified learning spaces that are related to current thinking in workplace design:

- **dens – group learning areas where learners can work together, be able to see one another's screen and discuss work**
- **cells – areas of concentrated study for learners who need space for quiet activities**
- **clubs – active social areas, usually consisting of sofas and coffee tables.¹**

There is a constant in all of the classifications that we have researched. Each makes clear that the learner should be provided with a choice of spaces. The learner needs space to work alone without interruption or interaction to contemplate or reflect on their work. Learners need spaces in which they can engage with the tutor and work with peers. Finally, learners need spaces in which to socialise with one another and their tutor, to relax and to stimulate discussion.

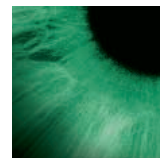
The non-intimidating environment

Most training providers we spoke to want to make sure that their learning environments are not reminiscent of a classroom, which is in line with current pedagogic technique within education more generally. The AMA report stated that formal spaces for large groups with a 'sage on a stage' are becoming less common than smaller, less formal settings where students learn from one another as well as from their teacher. *"Long, rectangular spaces with a teacher focus at one end are out. Squarer spaces are in."*

Many trainers suggested that creating semi-social spaces such as breakout areas or using catering facilities helped to create a non-intimidating setting for learners. The JISC report² advises that well-designed social spaces are likely to increase the motivation of learners and may even have an impact on their ability to learn. High-quality space for informal learning will also enhance the profile of the institution with its target groups.

For these reasons, social spaces are given a high priority in new designs. The Ufl publication also advises that learning centres should try to provide a break area and suggests that, in smaller spaces, this can be shared with the reception area.

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Good environmental conditions generally are critical to the success of any space

Environmental conditions

Lighting is a key element within the learning space. Learners need light to read, write, operate computers and see any instruction material and, of course, the tutor who is instructing them. We noted that 60 per cent of the centres we visited used a range of overhead and uplighting, while the other 40 per cent had uniform overhead lighting levels. In our own work, we use a range of lights including task lighting that gives learners some autonomy over their personal space.

Good environmental conditions generally are critical to the success of any space. Heating and ventilation can be difficult to control in spaces where there are large numbers of computers and other machines. If a space is too warm, learners will become tired, and if too cold, they will lose concentration.

The AMA study states that many educational buildings fail as spaces for learning due to poor air quality and inadequate environmental features such as light and acoustics. It quotes Bill Mitchell of the Media Lab at MIT: *"Fundamental human needs like comfort, natural light, operable windows, good social ambience, nice sort of quality and views out the window are still extremely important in creating good educational facilities."*

The importance of some kind of view was also touched on by one of the trainers we interviewed: *"I can think of many instances where you go along to learn and you're stuck in some gloomy room the outlook from which is the back wall of another building six feet away, which to me does not put you in a healthy frame of mind in which to train. But if you've got pleasant surroundings it's a good introduction."*

There is some evidence that a positive view can aid learning. In our work as designers, we often use landscape images or graphics if the space has no access to a view. This also helps to create a unique identity for the centre.

*"Roger Ulrich has shown that views of natural scenes bring about a reduction in stress among university students facing a challenging exam and that a view to a natural setting, or even a picture representing a natural setting, significantly shortens recovery time for surgical patients."*³

Technology and equipment

The centres we visited used a variety of technology and equipment, from laptops to interactive whiteboards and flipcharts. The type of equipment being used depended on a few of the following factors:

- the kind of activity being undertaken
- the finances available
- the equipment that learners were using in their workplaces, including software.

One trainer told us: *"We don't upgrade it too much. We're on Microsoft 2000. If we upgrade too soon we can be leaving people behind."*

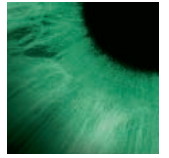
Technology changes rapidly and opinions vary about the best types to use. Learning institutions are using a wealth of technology, such as laptop lending, smart-boards and interactive plasma screens to allow learners and tutors to interact immediately with the screen. Projectors and video cameras are also used to record sessions in vocational spaces.

Hi-tech is not always best-tech. Flipcharts, magnetic whiteboards and writable surfaces are often used in educational environments. These give learners choice and are easily used. Some of the trainers we spoke to use flip charts and overhead projectors simply because they are easier and faster. A quarter of the trainers we interviewed stressed the importance of using visual material as much as possible.

"I use power point but also the overhead projector. Visuals are better for people to focus and learn rather than just be spoken to because it's easy to switch off."

Furniture is a key tool in creating a successful learning environment. In nearly half of the learning centres we visited, flexible furniture such as stackable chairs and collapsible tables were favoured. This allowed the staff to re-configure the space with ease, allowing for a number of teaching and learning styles.

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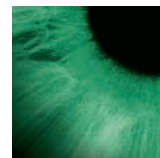
Flexible furniture and mobile partitions can be used with great success to create a multi-functioning learning space at minimum cost. Desks that are star or circular shapes work best for less formal arrangements, as they allow learners to look at one another's screen or discuss the work and avoid the rigid classroom setup.

Conclusion

From interviewing staff in learning centres and from our own research, we have learned that there are a number of key factors that are useful for those planning to set up a training space for SME clients to consider:

- 1 When working in the client's business premises, try to use private rooms that are a distance from the main working environment. This will help learners to relax by removing them from interruptions and creating a sense of privacy. Consider using a mobile learning environment, which will allow the centre to be set up anywhere and will increase flexibility.
- 2 When establishing a learning centre, try to rent a space in a larger setting where you can get access to larger training rooms. This will allow you to take on more learners and establish flexibility.
- 3 Ensure that the entrance is clearly signposted, particularly if your centre is in a larger building, and that you have good directional signage.
- 4 Avoid classroom-style layouts. Try to plan your space with a number of options for different styles of learning. Use circular arrangements to allow students to learn from one another and to prevent a hierarchical method of teaching.
- 5 Consider using furniture that is flexible, such as collapsible tables and stackable chairs. This will allow you to reconfigure your space for different styles of learning and teaching.
- 6 Try to include social areas such as lounges and cafeterias if possible. This will encourage learners to talk and will relax those who may feel tense. A catering offer may also make learning more memorable.
- 7 Consider laptops rather than fixed PCs. They are less formal and may help learners who lack confidence and those with learning difficulties.
- 8 Give learners some autonomy over lighting by using task lights and ensuring that the space can be ventilated well by natural means, such as opening a window, or by mechanical ventilation.
- 9 The technology that you use need not be expensive. A variety of teaching tools, from whiteboards to projectors, can create greater flexibility. Using visual material can also be more stimulating for learners.
- 10 Use learndirect scotland branding, qualifications and professional credits to create a professional image and lend credibility to your centre. It is not always possible to get a nice view, but do try to create a pleasant image to help learners to relax and give them something to focus on when thinking.

Use learndirect scotland branding, qualifications and professional credits to create a professional image and lend credibility to your centre



References

Unless specified, quotes are taken from interview transcripts.

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This paper is part of the Learning Principles series, which aims to provide accessible and practical information for staff in learndirect scotland branded learning centres.

Each document highlights best practice to help people to learn and stay learning.

The series covers a range of themes including sensory impairment, learning difficulties, brain sciences and working with deaf learners.

Learning Principles papers are available in pdf and plain text formats at:

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