Spaces for learning? Student diary mapping at Edge Hill University

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INTRODUCTION

Learning Services is one of the largest academic support departments in Edge Hill University, with approximately 130 staff based across four libraries and a number of outreach centres. Comprising library, support for ICT, specific learning difficulties (SpLD), media development, technology-enhanced learning and the virtual learning environment (VLE), Learning Services has been a holder of the Customer Service Excellence award (previously known as Charter Mark) since 2005.

In 2012 restructuring of the Customer Services division of the service saw the creation of a learning spaces team whose key remit was to ensure that the learning spaces in our four libraries are fit for purpose. As well as managing the spaces in terms of functionality, aesthetics and housekeeping, the team was tasked with monitoring usage and activity to enable us to make changes and improvements based on user behaviour.

Whilst this process may have started with gathering more traditional statistical quantitative data (head counts for example), we soon started to realise that we needed more detailed qualitative data that would tell us not just how many students were in a space, but what they were actually doing whilst they were there and how that space was contributing positively to their behaviour and academic practice.

QUANTITATIVE TECHNIQUES

The quantitative data is important and does give us some interesting information about both volume and types of activity that students are undertaking in our libraries. For a number of years we have conducted seating sweeps and activity counts (under the umbrella term 'roving observations') and in the academic year 2013–14 we were able to complete 71 observations at different times throughout the day.

In the main university library, at the Ormskirk campus, the learning spaces team conducted the 71 roving observations in key zones of the library:

- ground floor social learning space
- quiet study spaces
- silent study room
- PC zones
- book stock
- group rooms

The team recorded activity in a number of ways, one of which was to use a heat map. (Fig. 1)

The team was looking for a range of indicators to record: numbers of students in the space, students working individually / in groups, the use of technology and whether this was at a fixed PC or via a mobile device, the use of books / print journals, average group sizes.

This type of exercise generates a lot of data (and spreadsheets!) and so an important part of the process was for the team to unpick the data and begin to tell some meaningful stories. A good way to do this is to use infographics, which help visualise statistics and data for easy understanding. The image in Fig. 2 formed part of a larger set of infographics that the team produced to enable wider discussion and to aid decision-making and planning for future changes to the spaces. (Fig. 2)

QUALITATIVE TECHNIQUES

To complement this quantitative data, we have also employed a number of qualitative methods over the last 12–18 months including:

- *Scribble sheets* We placed blank A3 sheets in key areas and asked students to comment on their experience of working in these areas. One of the outputs of this exercise was the purchase of fans for each individual study room in the library.
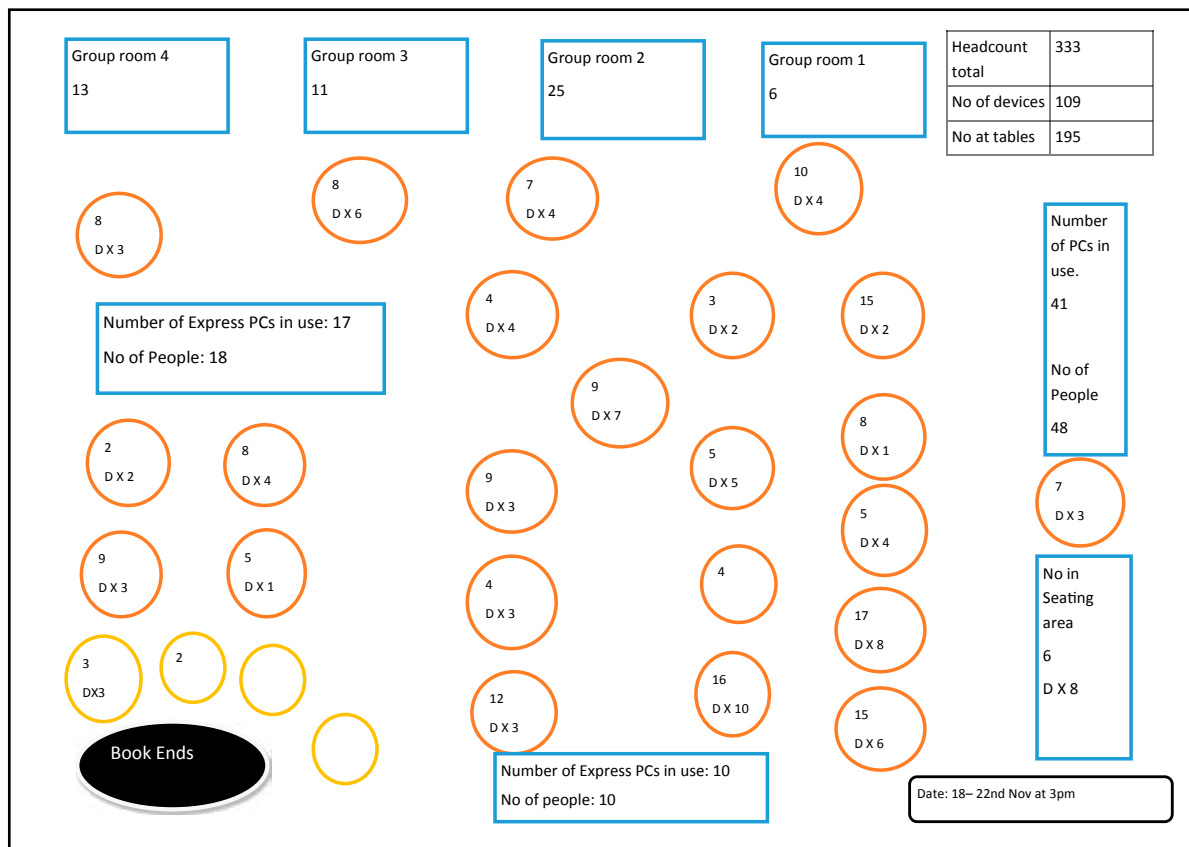
Group room 4

13

Group room 3

11

Group room 2

25

Group room 1

6

Headcount total	333
No of devices	109
No at tables	195

8
D X 3

8
D X 6

7
D X 4

10
D X 4

Number of PCs in use.

41

No of People

48

Number of Express PCs in use: 17
No of People: 18

4
D X 4

3
D X 2

15
D X 2

9
D X 7

2
D X 2

8
D X 4

9
D X 3

5
D X 5

8
D X 1

7
D X 3

9
D X 3

5
D X 1

4
D X 3

5
D X 4

No in Seating area

6

D X 8

3
DX3

2

12
D X 3

4

17
D X 8

16
D X 10

15
D X 6

Book Ends

Number of Express PCs in use: 10
No of people: 10

Date: 18– 22nd Nov at 3pm

Fig. 1 Example heat map

- *Non participant observations* Our learning spaces team spent time in each of the library zones observing activity and recording interesting behaviour.
- *Exit interviews* On exiting the building students were asked for their feedback on what spaces they used and why.

STUDENT DIARY MAPPING

After reading details of the ERIAL project (http://www.erialproject.org/) and the Library Study at Fresno State (http://www.fresnostate.edu/social-sciences/anthropology/ipa/thelibrarystudy.html), we decided to try using student diary mapping to give us an additional viewpoint direct from the students themselves and without the intervention of library staff. We wanted students to tell us their stories of how they used the library, what made them choose certain areas to work in and what spaces were barriers or enablers, to their learning. When we tried this exercise the previous academic year we had limited success in engaging students, and so this time we decided to recruit students more formally and pay them for their time. Ten students were recruited and were given an overview of the project at the initial meeting. We asked them to take part in:
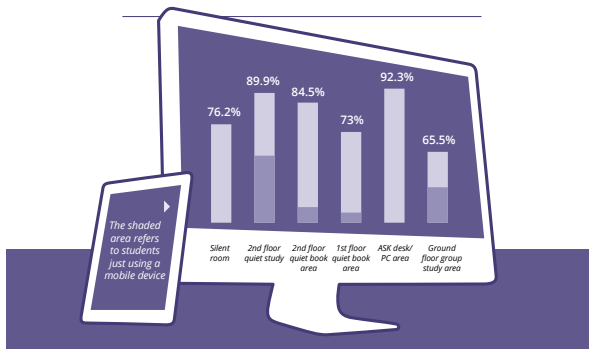
- Real time diary entries: to write down all activities (related to learning!) undertaken in one day from the moment they woke, to the moment they went to bed. We wanted details of the activity, but also any thoughts / feelings and any barriers they experienced
- To map out (literally to draw on maps of the building) their journeys in the university library learning spaces
- To take photographs of things that were important to them and vice versa

When the exercises had been completed we met with the students individually to discuss their diaries, maps and photographs. Most students gave us very thorough diary entries, so the interviews were an opportunity to engage the students in a wider dialogue. The interviews brought the diaries to life and provided valuable information in a more informal way. We discovered that most students have a favourite PC and a least favourite PC in the library, and it was amusing to see that one student's favourite PC was another student's least favourite!

The interviews were also a chance for the students to engage in some reflection about how and why they are using the library, something that they may not get chance to do very often. One student said 'I was surprised, after doing this diary for

only one day, just how much I used the differ-ent services. Not just getting books out but the reception desk, the ASK desk, workshops, room bookings, the lockers.'

University Library - *Activity*

% of people using technology
(a mobile device or PC) *by study area*

Area	%
Silent room	76.2%
2nd floor quiet study	89.9%
2nd floor quiet book area	84.5%
1st floor quiet book area	73%
ASK desk/PC area	92.3%
Ground floor group study area	65.5%

The shaded area refers to students just using a mobile device

% of people per study area

Area	%
Silent room	2.9%
2nd floor quiet study	11.6%
2nd floor quiet book area	25.4%
1st floor quiet book area	17.4%
ASK desk/PC area	8.4%
Ground floor group study area	30.1%
Foyer	4.3%

% of people in the library working with books

39.7%
% of people in the library working with books

30%
% of people working with books and a PC

40.6%
% of people working with books and a mobile device

3
*Average group size
(in library group rooms)*

% of people working with books in the library (by floor)

Floor	%
Ground floor	18.9%
1st floor	51.3%
2nd floor	48.9%
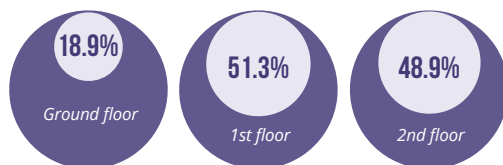
All statistics collected during the period between 1st Oct and 31st May 2014

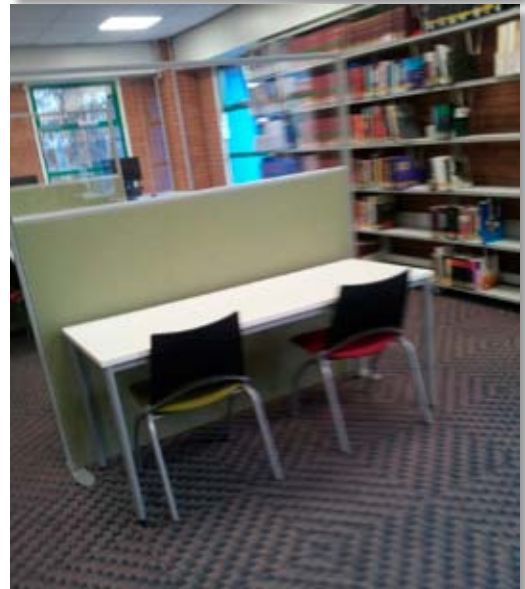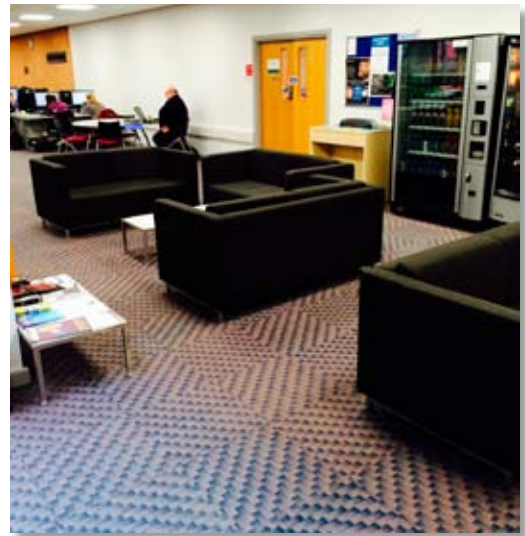*Fig. 2 Sample infographic*

Fig 3. Positive areas

We had also asked the students to provide us with at least five photos of areas in the library that they either liked or disliked.

Fig. 3 shows a selection of photographs that students felt were their favourite areas. Comments ranged from liking the café as it enabled them to eat and drink whilst studying, to liking the defined spaces in the library, e.g. silent room, quiet study spaces, law area. Students liked the spaces that were near the books they needed so that they didn't have to go and spend time looking for items.
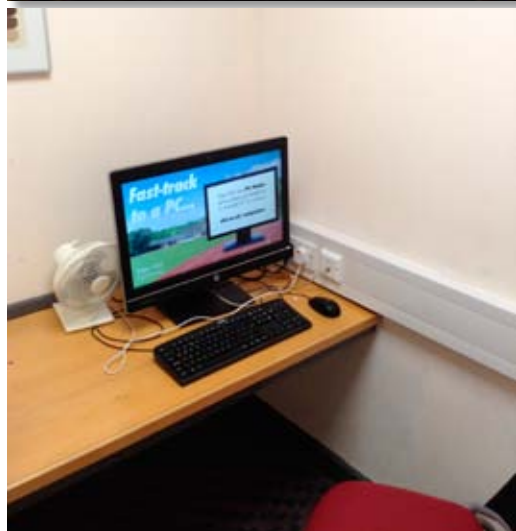

Fig 4. Negative areas

Fig. 4 shows areas that they didn't like, which were, again, varied. Some didn't like how some of the desks are in really dark spots in the library. The individual study rooms also featured as some students felt they are too small and cramped. One of the students said that he liked the chairs in our foyer area but that we needed to replicate these in a space designated for reading.

Next steps

From both the quantitative and qualitative data we have collected, we have been able to get an excellent insight into how our spaces are being utilised by students. Whilst there was some consensus that emerged around key issues (noise, furniture, mobile technologies), what was particularly interesting was engaging with students on a one-to-one basis and listening to ten unique stories about our learning spaces and the impact they have on students' behaviour and academic practice. Whilst the methods described above are time-consuming, we feel that continued assessment of spaces and direct feedback from students is vital so that our library spaces can continue to be the 'go to' places for students.

References

http://www.fresnostate.edu/socialsciences/anthropology/ipa/thelibrarystudy.html

http://www.erialproject.org/

Further reading

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