Future of the Physical Learning Spaces Use by Educators

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Abstract: This paper reflects about the future of physical learning spaces emphasizing its potential in supporting educators during pandemic restrictions and beyond. Despite the budgetary and political pressures, there is a need to further develop learning infrastructure where physical space is its crucial component. Bringing an example of a recently finalized refurbishment of the Innovative Learning Hub space at Nazarbayev University, the author discusses the ways of its efficient usage by educators.

Introduction

The future of the physical learning spaces can be analyzed through its great potential in supporting educators. In higher education, every space can and should become a learning space. So, universities need to make learning spaces one of its strategic priorities to help learners to connect, collaborate and communicate ubiquitously. And by “learners” we mean not only students. Physical learning spaces allow for the open and active network and collaborations where teaching practices and various issues or concerns related to teaching and learning could be shared and discussed.

There is enough research about the prioritization of importance of balanced classrooms where students are at the center of the instruction (e.g. Zemelman et al., 2012) or about how teaching activities shape the classroom layout (e.g. Sommer, 1977). There are also studies that show how design of the physical environment at work improves human productivity (e.g. Caldwell, 1994). However, there is not so much research about the design of the learning spaces where teachers are learning with their peers.

The aim of this project was to create such a learning place for educators and evaluate its effectiveness in building teacher learning communities. Due to pandemic restrictions, the number of faculty utilizing an in-person learning space remains very low. However, we plan to conduct a study on its usage and occupancy evaluation once we are on campus.

Innovative learning hub space at Nazarbayev University

Nazarbayev University (NU) is located in Kazakhstan’s capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly known as Astana), and is a very young (10 years) yet ambitious university. The language of instruction is English and our faculty come from all over the world to contribute to the formation and development of academic and research excellence in Central Asia.
Throughout the country, the resources, initiatives, and infrastructure features of the universities vary. At NU, there are faculty members who reside on a university campus and providing them a place where they can meet and jointly build and improve their teaching strategies would significantly support their collegiality and wellness.

Belonging to the nomadic culture, Kazakhs have always paid special attention to space, but not only to its physical side. For nomads, space is open allowing and calling to be filled in. Even if there is nothing physically there, space can’t be empty, it has to have its meaning, a purpose. That was a founding idea of the concept of the Innovative Learning Hub (hereinafter – Hub) space which initially was just a corridor.

The Innovative Learning Hub is a unit within the Office of the Provost and its mission is to provide resources and support to develop innovative approaches to learning and teaching for NU faculty. Also, the Hub offers multimedia support and guidance on how to design courses, teach and assess in online and blended modes. The main aim of the Hub is to support the development of high-quality multimedia educational content and provide training focused on enhancing the curriculum and developing digitally-talented educators.

**Converting empty corridor into a space for teachers: design ideas and management**

We decided to involve our strategic partner – Steelcase – to help us create design based on our concept idea: create a welcoming physical place for faculty and future faculty members where they can jointly experiment with their teaching through introduction of new pedagogies and re-designing existing instructional materials and activities. There were no much discussions or debates at the university around the design of the Hub’s space, neither there were faculty focus groups to specifically discuss their expectations about that space. However, the suggested design was slightly reconfigured by the Hub administrator together with another strategic partner – Sembol – that completed all construction works. We started the works in February 2020, and had to stop everything until May when the toughest lockdown restrictions were eased. In addition, ongoing budgetary pressures were leading to question the rationale of such a space refurbishment posing the biggest challenge of continuation of construction works due to the uncertainty around distance learning and teaching. All the works were finalized on December 18, 2020, converting an empty corridor into a welcoming space for teachers. We believe that Hub’s space will become an educational and practical space for design thinking among the teachers to help them “think with design” (Kohls, 2019, p. 229).

**What did the space look like before the transformations.**

The Hub’s space is comprised of one office, a media production studio and a long corridor that bridges these two rooms. Not much was going on in that particular space as it was hidden behind the doors, and was used mostly by administrative staff to go from one side of the block to another. There was a strong echo which made it impossible to think of any long conversations in that space.
What does the space look like after transformations.

The major transformations took place in the corridor. To reduce the sound reverberation, we added acoustic details to the ceiling, and put the carpet on the floor. The corporate brand ornaments with the university logo were placed on the walls both for acoustic and esthetic purposes. A sofa and the charging base stations were placed at the entrance to the office, where we also added tables, chairs, and whiteboards.

Empowering teachers to empower each other and students

NU Hub aims to be an incubator for educationally-innovative practices, where our faculty can experiment. Moreover, such physical space can offer new forms of teaching relationships and networking bolstering for more dialogues and sharing experiences about everyday teaching practices (Zozakiewicz & Rodrigues, 2007). Space can become an “activator of learning” (Goodyear & Dudley, 2015) for better teacher preparation.

However, pandemic situation brought another perspective to be considered when evaluating effectiveness of usage of such physical spaces: what makes physical learning spaces unique? Before pandemic situation in 2020, almost all programs were delivered on campus with several programs employing blended modality. There were no online courses. Therefore, it is particularly interesting to see how extensive online teaching from scratch influenced our faculty attitude towards the physical learning spaces.

When in virtual environments, educators can recreate interactions in physical spaces. But can physical spaces recreate online experiences in learning and teaching? Moreover, when back on campus, what would our faculty like to see different in regards to physical spaces?

Future steps

Changed learning landscapes due to COVID-19 showed us the potential of virtual environments, however physical spaces should not be empty and its usage needs to be re-considered or redefined. Despite some restrictions about the campus access, providing faculty with opportunities in terms of efficient physical space usage where they can work might result in a more rapid formation of communities of practice. Physical learning spaces can be promoters of high-impact educational practices.

I plan to arrange Zoom coffee hours presenting the renovated Hub’s space and start conversations with faculty providing insights into the ways administration can support our teachers in networking and collaborations in physical learning spaces.

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