

Students as Agents for Change in Learning and Teaching

Graduate Management Trainee and Research Assistant: Roos Zandstra

Project Director: Liz Dunne

Project blog: <https://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/studentprojects>

Project website: <http://as.exeter.ac.uk/support/educationenhancementprojects/change/>

Case study 3 – Film Studies: Report on Shared Learning Spaces

Introduction

The popularity with film lies in its capacity to capture the viewer in its world. The spectator identifies with the on-screen image and enters the cinematic space, the third space that lies between him/her and the screen-world. Use of teaching space can have a similar function; a positive spatial experience enables the creation of a relationship between oneself and one's surroundings. In relation to film, appropriate learning and viewing facilities are important for students, as they can create a positive relationship with the learning space and subsequently with the learning material.

Three years ago, Film Studies students benefited from a space called the AV room. This was a space with private, group viewing facilities; it housed videos and DVDs, and had a common area for group discussion. It was a friendly space that enabled staff and students to engage in informal discussion together, and also allowed students from different years to get to know each other. Film Studies students are a small group, and this learning space had to be absorbed into cross-campus room provision. Alternative viewing facilities have been made available, but for use by students in all departments. Sharing the facilities with students outside the Film Studies department is not a problem, and most students believe that an exchange between different subjects and across all years can only be beneficial to learning. However, there was some concern that these new facilities are less well equipped, and are available for a variety of AV purposes that are not necessarily conducive to viewing film. Hence this project investigated how film-viewing facilities are currently used by students, and whether they support the user's learning experience.

Methods of data collection

An online Likert-style questionnaire was designed to capture:

- Student opinion of current film viewing facilities;
- Information on opportunities to share learning with staff and peers;
- Accounts of students' experiences of the AV room before its use was changed.

Analysis of data

The online questionnaire was completed by 24 students, most of whom had not experienced the original AV room facilities. Two thirds of the sample considered current film viewing facilities to be adequate. However, not all students were equally satisfied. One student commented, *'The facilities at the moment are so uniquely terrible that I barely believe you have the audacity to label them 'facilities'.*

A large proportion of the respondents (58%) thought that there were adequate opportunities to engage with other students and staff, although the majority did not have the chance to discuss their learning or interests with Film Studies students from other years on a regular basis, and nearly two thirds stated they did not know anyone studying film outside their year group. They suggested that they would like to change this situation: *'There is no Film Studies Society and no encouragement to engage with your peers. A fortnightly arranged informal meeting across all three years would be highly beneficial in developing a bond between the 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students'.* One student went as far as saying they would like interaction with peers to be a compulsory element of the programme: *'I think that the online discussions and the study groups should be mandatory and regulated by the tutors (possibly graded as well) to make discussions happen, since often out-of- lectures/seminar study groups don't happen as people prefer to do other things. If it was mandatory and graded then it would happen and I'm sure that would have a positive effect on learning'.*

Students considered that an informal space where they could discuss their studies with peers would aid their learning. From the 24 respondents, only one thought that it would be easy to book out a room to view films with their peers. Access to course material was also highlighted as an issue, with over half of students finding course materials hard to find. In addition, very few students thought they could access past students' thesis and dissertation projects. Indeed, most did not even know that such resources could be made available, although the majority (79%) felt they would benefit from having such access.

The table below outlines how often students reported using the current film viewing facilities. All of the facilities were mostly used less than once a month. Cluster computers and the multi-media suite were the two facilities used the most. However, these are clearly not conducive to discussion and shared learning as no more than 3-4 students at most are able to see the screen at once and they are located in areas where talking needs to be kept to a minimum.

	< once a week	Once a week	Once a fortnight	Once a month	> once a month
Seminar room (main library)	4	4	13	4	75
Multi-media suite (main library)	13	13	4	25	46
M & D room (Guild)	0	4	8	0	88
Cluster computers	21	4	0	21	54
Group working room (main library)	4	8	8	17	63

Table 1: Number of times current film viewing facilities are used by students

The table below shows students reported use of the film viewing facilities currently available.

	Watching course materials	Discussing course materials with peers	Discussing course materials with staff	Watching to broaden learning	Do not use this space
Seminar room (library)	11	4	1	4	10
Multimedia suite (library)	11	8	1	3	1
M & D room (Guild)	1	1	0	2	14
Cluster computers	1	1	1	3	7
Group working room (library)	4	11	0	1	8

Table 2: How are the facilities used?

Students who had experienced the AV room prior to its closing were asked how often and for what purpose they had used the space. Responses suggest that it was used much more frequently than any of the facilities currently available.

	More than once a week:	Once a week:	Once a fortnight:	Once a month:	Less than once a month:
AV room	26.1	17.4	8.7	17.4	30.4

Table 3: AV room usage

One student commented that *'The facilities in the library are greatly diminished since the closure of the AV room and the Television stations have no headphones and the space is too open, a separate room is needed'*. Seven out of ten students thought that losing access to the AV room meant they had less opportunity to share their learning with peers and academic staff'. One student said of the AV room that *'It allowed myself and fellow peers to come together as a group and watch a film analytically, giving us freedom to pause and discuss whilst still having a reasonable size screen. This made the learning experience more liberating, more democratic, but most of all more enjoyable'*.

Overall, students are clearly dissatisfied with the current film viewing facilities available. One said: *'not good enough... Screenings are often in small box classrooms. The films are being projected on walls either with a distracting dirty mark or with the edge of a whiteboard distorting the frame'*.

When students were asked what an ideal space would look like, they suggested:

- *'A room which is comfortable and large enough to fit a group of about 10 people where you can discuss the film'*.
- *'In the library, like the old AV room with comfortable seats and decent film viewing facilities'*.
- *'It would be anywhere on main campus, ideally in a secluded spot with enough room for at least 20 people. It would have a selection on comfy chairs, sofas and bean bags, a large screen to view films on, and perhaps some individual tables with dim lamps to take notes on the film. A room adjacent to this, with tables and chairs would be a useful area to discuss the films viewed in groups, or to meet with peers. The viewing space needs to be big, comfy, warm and adequately kitted with a VHS, DVD player and correct note-taking, working facilities'*.

Summary of Findings

This study outlines that a proportion of Film Studies students are currently not satisfied with the film viewing facilities available to them and that students who had previously experienced the AV facility feel that their learning experience has been diminished with the loss of this space. The previous AV room was a space where formal and informal learning was encouraged, where discussion with academics and peers was a useful part of the learning experience, and where activities such as group film viewing outside classes were an enjoyable addition to timetabled opportunities. A proportion of students feel strongly that there are now not enough opportunities to learn collaboratively with their peers. Very few students currently discuss their learning with students outside their years, and the majority of students do not know any students outside their year - despite the Film studies cohort being very small overall. This is perceived to be unhelpful to learning. The current film viewing facilities are under-used because they are not suitable for the purposes required by Film students and, of those that are used, most are not conducive to discussion or collaborative learning. Students feel that a new space where they can watch film in groups, without distractions, and can discuss their studies with peers across all year groups, and potentially also with staff, would greatly aid their learning. Of benefit also would be to have copies of past student dissertations easily available so that others recognise these as a resource that can support their learning.

Recommendations/Solutions

It is felt that the upcoming Forum Project is an example how space can be used to help to enhance the learning experience of students at the University of Exeter. As part of this project, it is hoped that a shared learning space for students studying film will be created since this would be beneficial to all students who watch film - which is actually a much broader group than just the Film Studies students. This space would be a place where students would be able to discuss their learning as well as view film. Located away from quiet areas, the space should be large enough to accommodate groups of about 20 comfortably for both viewing and note-taking. To encourage the use of previous student dissertations as a tool for learning, it would be useful if these could be made available for students to read in the same vicinity as video and DVD collections.

*Study undertaken with Alessandra Luciano
Film Studies Subject Chair
July 2009*