Learning spaces workshop

“Space—whether physical or virtual—can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness.”

A paraphrased version of Diana Oblinger’s message about learning space set the tone for the workshop hosted by the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) on April 5th, attended by around 20 people from departments around the University of Maryland. CTE Director Spencer Benson co-hosted the workshop with Cinthya Ippoliti of the University Libraries.

One of the main premises of the workshop was that the nature of the environment in which learning takes place either helps or hinders learning. Benson and Ippoliti outlined developments on campus that are aimed at facilitating student learning through space redesign and repurposing. One of those is the recently opened Terrapin Learning Commons, a space on the second floor of McKeldin Library where students have access to computers, printers, scanners; lots of power outlets; comfortable furniture that can be rearranged. The space is open all-night, and some students bring in air mattresses when they go there, Ippoliti said. But even though it’s in the library, the TLC is not somewhere a student should go if they are seeking quiet, said Ippoliti. The space is “very noisy and dynamic,” she said -- so much so that it has been nicknamed Club McKeldin. In spite of that, the TLC is conducive to learning.

After brief talks by Benson and Ippoliti, the workshop divided up into small working groups, and participants were asked to note down on orange Post-Its what they thought were key attributes of a 21st-century learning space. When the results were posted on the walls of the meeting room, they showed the importance, in the minds of attendees at the meeting, of comfort and convenience to learning. Everyone suggested that there be plenty of power outlets in their ideal learning space -- to allow 21st-century students to plug in their laptops.

After that exercise, participants drew a mock-up of their ideal space. All of the sketches included depictions of comfortable furniture, outlets galore, and windows.
to the outside – the latter likely spurred by Benson’s quote from a study that found that looking at nature helps the brain to reset when it reaches a certain cognitive load.

Indeed, looking out the window when your brain is feeling overloaded can lead to an “aha” moment, such as those experienced by Archimedes who discovered a way to calculate density through buoyancy while in the bath, or Isaac Newton who came up with the universal law of gravitation when an apple fell on his head while he was sitting in an orchard. Robert Lee Hotz wrote about these “aha” or “eureka” moments in the Wall Street Journal in June 2009.

But back to the workshop...

Other attributes that attendees thought should be included in a learning space were online access, an atmosphere that fosters social interaction, and moveable furniture. All the attributes are aimed at comfort and ease of use.

One of the mock-up designs of learning spaces featured an indoor waterfall, a fireplace, and glass-enclosed “quiet space” surrounded by a much larger active space. Another featured a “circle of comfort”, with beanbag chairs facing a large screen: when the professor lectures or shows a video or PowerPoint, students could watch from comfortable chairs.

The mock-ups and attributes were drawn or written on Post-Its, big and small. According to Hotz in his Wall Street Journal article, Post-Its were the product of an “aha” moment.

Go to EDUCAUSE’s “Learning Spaces” e-Book, edited by Diana Oblinger, to see case studies of successful learning spaces.

Participants designed their ideal learning space.