
Getting into the learning zone! Northumbria University's Zones4Learning: a fusion of inspiration and practical nous



Annie Kilner
Service Manager: Operations,
Northumbria University
Tel: 0191 227 4129
E-mail: annie.kilner@northumbria.ac.uk

(Annie has moved to Teesside University since submitting this article)

'Zones4Learning' is a flexible and dynamic space in the library which allows students and staff to create their own learning and teaching environments to suit their needs. At a time when many libraries are grappling with the tensions of providing space for study, teaching and collections, Zones4Learning is Northumbria University's library and learning services' latest exploration into multipurpose space.

Pushing the boundaries of flexible study, Zones4Learning is a wireless-enabled area large enough to hold 90 people. It is fitted with state-of-the-art technologies, including student desktops, audio-visual equipment, SMART boards and a mobile 'TeamMate' unit. Folding acoustic dividers and fully mobile stacking furniture mean the zone can be split into any combination of larger and smaller rooms, set up in various configurations. This allows simultaneous use, maximising occupancy by creating a highly flexible area that can be used by students and staff for a variety of purposes including:

- collaborative study ('brainstorming' ideas; group assignments; practising presentations; watching DVDs; study and research activities using the Virtual Learning Environment and other collaborative technologies)

- delivery of the Northumbria skills programme, comprising a range of information, IT and study skills sessions
- open-day activities (fresher events and inductions; school visits)
- conferences, seminars and meetings
- exhibition space.

The project arose as a result of formal and informal student feedback, observation of student behaviour and focused research into the student journey and staff requirements. Focus groups and interviews with staff and students provided a rich vein of information and ideas that were then fed into the design. For example, our research pointed to:

- the clear requirement for a place to work collaboratively and to practice presentations
- a desperate need for adequate hands-on demonstration and training facilities
- the need for a variety of rooms, requiring different set-ups depending on function
- rooms suitable for staff meetings and library events
- the desire to continue to explore new technologies and allow students the chance to customise their own study environment as far as possible
- an increasing need for breakout space for student activities.

Library staff from across the department worked with estates and IT services colleagues to work out how the area could meet the complex multifunctional brief. The equipment and furniture had to be suitable for a variety of uses and, even more problematic, the zone must remain usable for diverse functions timetabled side by side (e.g. a student study group alongside a training seminar) and open 24x7. A tall order!

The complex timetabling and streamlined process for getting the area rearranged in between tightly scheduled uses are a testament to staff ingenuity and a shared focus on enhancing the student experience. Wireless technology and the availability of power points ensure that students and staff are able to use laptops and other portable equipment. A lapsafe provides 30 laptops for loan

to supplement the existing 25 IT workstations. SMART boards and audio-visual equipment are cleverly set up to allow separate and linked operations, depending on room layout. The acoustic screens are light and easy to move, yet solid and soundproof when closed. CCTV cameras help ensure a secure and safe environment for study 24x7, but can also be closed off if the areas are to be used for interviews and confidential meetings. (See Figure 1.)



Students and staff experiment with collaborative technologies and flexible equipment in Zones4Learning.

Has it been a success? Most definitely. Zones4Learning was launched with an exciting, interactive café-style event. Students and staff called in for free refreshments and tried their hands at the SMART board drawing competition and the TeamMate 'graffiti wall'. Students' feedback was immediate and positive. 'Great facilities and great concept', said one. 'I love it', said another; '... so light and airy. Beautifully organised. A real asset to the university.'

Zones4Learning has pushed at the boundaries of multifunctional, flexible space. It's a move away from the traditional 'chalk and talk' meeting and training areas that simply no longer meet the pedagogic requirements of Northumbria's learning and teaching strategy. It has added to the diversity of the student study experience by offering a creative, ambient and flexible study environment. It allows the students to develop collaborative and research skills using state-of-the-art technologies in a supported and secure environment. Add 24x7 access into the mix and Zones4Learning truly offers students and staff everything they need for study, research and training in a single but multifaceted environment. It's another step in the fusion of physical and virtual space.