

beyond the sum of its parts:
organic growth and classroom design in a
special school environment

a learning history

Yeoman Park Special School

October 2011

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INTRODUCTION

What is a learning history?

A learning history is a document that tells a story in the words of the people who were involved, each from his or her own perspective. From these stories common themes emerge which can help make sense of the process, and draw out learning for future projects.

This learning history tells the story of a project at Yeoman Park Special School in Mansfield Woodhouse. The project started with an exploration of approaches to learning for students with profound and multiple learning difficulties and how to develop learning environments to support these approaches, and led to changes in practice and the reimagination and remodelling of the school's central hall space as a 'blank canvas' media learning environment. (MLE)

The document starts with two simple parallel stories of the process, from the perspective of the teacher at the school entrusted with developing the project, John Naylor, and from the perspective of the architect/ facilitator who worked alongside the school, John Mitchell. This sets the context, and is followed by the learning history itself.

The learning history weaves together the stories of participants in the project, around common themes that have emerged from the stories. It is structured around these themes, and presented in a 2 column format, with the narrative sitting next to a commentary that explores and explains concepts emerging from the narrative. There is no set way to read the learning history – some people will prefer to read it in the usual linear way, some may wish to look at the theme descriptions, while others may wish to read only the narratives or the commentary.

Methodology

This study has used a narrative and participative approach, with interviews with 10 participants in the project including the head teacher, teaching staff and teaching assistants, a physiotherapist, the ICT technician, the site manager, office staff, the Creative Partnerships creative agent, and dance practitioner. Interviews were transcribed and individuals given the opportunity to check the transcriptions and add or change where necessary in order to clarify meaning. A workshop was then held with participants to share and check out the emerging themes.

Key themes

The key themes that have emerged and that will be explored in this learning history are:

- **Starting Point:** the combination on the one hand of the readiness of the school to engage in some profound rethinking of learning and learning environments, and on the other hand of the need for external support to enable this to happen.
- **Process and Change:** How the process has enabled change in the school through being open ended, and with the active involvement and engagement of the whole school. How a focus on practical issues, and on engaging with and understanding the change through doing and seeing have supported this process. And on the importance of 'disturbance' or 'turbulence' within the change process.
- **Impact and Outcomes:** How the process and new MLE have impacted on teaching and learning and other aspects of school life.
- **Learning and Moving On:** What the school has learned from the process and how this might affect the school's work in the future.

Summary of key learning

There are several particularly important and fundamental learning points that have emerged from this study, and which are particularly important to understand and share with others interested in this project and its outcomes.

- The development of the Yeoman Park Hall and Media Learning Environment has been an 'open' process, with the priorities, design and use of the space 'emerging' from this process. In the output dominated climate of schools and education this can be seen as a high risk strategy, but it has proved to be highly effective
- The approach to and design of the Hall and Media Learning Environment are a result of this open process, and are very specific to the needs, culture and journey of Yeoman Park School. This design solution, therefore, is not necessarily appropriate to other schools, and a similar process would almost certainly lead other schools in a very different direction
- The process for this development is not only appropriate for building or capital projects, and the school are now exploring how a similar approach can be used across all school change and development projects

THE STORY

THE TEACHER'S STORY

Autumn term 2008 Saw YP school about to start a building project. Our special school of over 90 learners was about to get a dance studio. In true teacher style we had acknowledged a need (space to perform and dance without interruption), looked for and found resources (money and environment), and identified a solution (pre-fabricated building). Job done we thought, all we need is a project manager and a timeline. Pity we would be losing all of our natural light to the hall, precious outside play space and views of trees and sky. We intended to accept this compromise, not happily but what else could we do?

At this time the school was involved with the Creative Partnerships (CP) initiative. We intended to use artists in the future dance space. Stephen Jon (the CP 'creative agent' for the school) introduced the idea of perhaps using a facilitator to help us with our thinking about space overall in school, as he had seen that we had been experimenting with different 'learning

environments' rather than classrooms. This concern with changing our classrooms came out of a recognition that we had to assess our provision for an ever growing number of pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. Indeed, the proposed studio would allow us a safe space to get wheelchair using students with complex learning difficulties out onto a floor to work physically; dance and PE. Also at this time we were in the BSF pipeline so the idea of a dialogue with an architect facilitator was seen by school as fortuitous.

Creative Partnerships funded a facilitator for a whole school staff Inset day and John Mitchell came into our school life. Our first realization was that he was not going to give us a design; we were going to have to think about what we really needed.



THE ARCHITECT / FACILITATOR'S STORY

I was brought into the school as a 'creative practitioner' by Creative Partnerships in the summer of 2006. First impressions were of a school bursting at the seams and full of energy, activity and enthusiasm; crammed full of equipment, furniture, people, displays, it was a place of visual and sensory overload. Incremental building additions, closed curtains, storage sheds, locked doors all added to this sense of overload by blocking off views and access to the outdoors, making the school feel claustrophobic and inward looking. The school's current proposal to insert a new dance studio into the last space with views and access to the outside would leave it feeling completely enclosed.

Facilitation was asking us: - did we want a quick solution to our problems with the hall in the form of a pre fab? Did we really need it? What would happen if we looked at the problems with the hall in a different way? How did the circulation of people and air affect our work? At this point we were definitely in a place of impasse. We could not go on trying to teach in the hall with its attendant problems of interruption and impoverishment, but the bolt on pre fab was becoming increasingly less attractive.



The school was organised like a typical single storey primary school around a central school hall. This hall was the circulation hub of the school, its meeting and gathering place, its social heart, and the only large space in the school for physical activities, dance, PE, physiotherapy.....It was a multi-functional space that was not really fit for purpose for any of its functions.

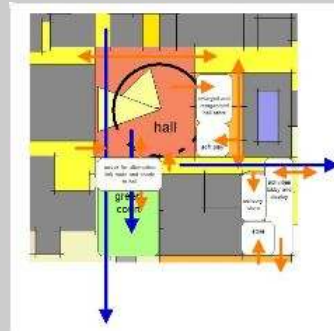
Fresh thinking was needed – at a strategic level. And this needed to involve and engage all the intelligences in the school; no one person or small group would be able to find the solutions.

Over two days in October 2006, I facilitated an Inset for the whole school. Through modelling, making, mapping and conversations we explored the issues, dreamed of how things might be and tentatively suggested some initial ways forward. From this emerged the proposal to focus on reimagining and remodelling the hall as the 'heart' of the school and as an effective learning environment, and using this remodelling to address the other issues of sensory overload and enclosure.

Working with a smaller group of staff from across the whole school (teaching and non teaching), ideas were discussed, strategies agreed and solutions explored.

John invited us to dream. We engaged with some practical visualization activities; making models and representations of our emerging ideas gave us a loose structure to take our continuing conversations further through the next few months.

John responded quickly to our ideas and drawings followed very soon, these were discussed by a smaller group of representatives from the hall users; teachers, site manager, physiotherapists, teaching assistants, cleaners and artists. John collated the threads of our conversations and the final design was agreed publically. We felt we had been listened to. We rethought our existing space in a creative way. John's insistence that he facilitated and advised, but we the users must vision our hopes and recognise our needs, came to fruition in the design of the hall. We didn't get our dance studio; we got liberation!



From the initial idea of a dance studio, ideas developed, and the space was conceived as a 'blank canvas' – somewhere where anything would be possible, where light, sound and image projection would create varied and sensory environments open to all sorts of learning opportunities. Visual clutter and kit would be replaced by imagination and open possibilities.

It would be a calm and calming space with views to nature and sky (but with electronic blinds to bring the focus in when needed). A canopy outside would both provide a sheltered outdoor learning space, and remove the glare and direct sunlight and allow the blinds to be kept open for views and perspective.

It would also be a practical space. By reorganising circulation and providing a foldable screen to one side, the hall would no longer be a through space when needed for focussed activities, but would quickly revert to the school's heart space for gatherings, assemblies etc.

After preparing strategic design drawings, the school then appointed a project manager to complete production information, engage a contractor and oversee the building works.

The Newhall, two years on has been a real success. It is used to optimum potential during the school week and during Extended Services provision. The quality of lessons observed in the hall is often outstanding and interruptions to lessons have ceased. We have a beautiful space to teach in. It has no visual clutter (white walls blinds and floor). We can travel time and space (theatre lighting , film and media projectors). We can concentrate (a clever concealed corridor takes people around, not through the space). We can create and innovate (teachers and students love working in the hall).

We got our Media Learning Environment instead of a school hall. We still have assemblies and dinnertime in the space but can subtly control lighting and focus.

We actually got something even more important; a reminder of just how important collective involvement is in a project that touches so many peoples work life. The development of the hall disputes the usefulness of 'top down' design however skilful or well meant. The ethos of Yeoman Park school has always been one of cooperative innovation, but after a point we would identify an expert if we couldn't do it ourselves. We learned that to be enabled to do the designing is better than buying the product.



When I next visited the school the project was completed, the hall was in use and clearly a success, and talk was turning to reimagining the school's outdoor learning and play environment....

..... but that is another story.

THEMES

1. Starting point

READINESS OF SCHOOL

This project didn't come from nowhere. The school were already actively exploring different ways of engaging their students, different approaches to learning, calmer but more immersive environments and working with creative practitioners from outside the school. They were also experiencing the frustrations of realising that it was very difficult to move these things on within their current environment.

COMMENTARY

Any change process in a school has to start from the current energies, ideas and practices already active in the school.

When this project started at Yeoman Park, there were a number of ideas and initiatives already underway.

Approaches to learning: the school was already exploring an approach to learning that was more open, that questioned the appropriateness of the traditional curriculum to the learning needs of the children in the school.

Simplifying the environment: conversations had already started about the amount of visual and physical 'clutter' in the school (and schools in general), and how distracting this can be for many of the students at

NARRATIVE

The school was fertile ground for new seeds, to grow something, something organic that came out of conversation.

....it was an opportunity for us to develop aspects of the school curriculum that we probably would have done anyway.....so...it wasn't new....it wasn't Creative Partnerships coming in and offering us something we hadn't thought of, it was about enhancing something that we had already identified that we wanted to do.

This idea of less being more, decluttering, getting rid.. the idea that for some learners we needed to strip down our classes to nothing, the most valuable thing was the space and the freedom to explore learning....There was an element of synchronicity, the school was ready...it gathered credence because people from outside were coming in to help us, and they were saying a similar thing....And very soon the idea of a 'blank canvas' – you would start hearing the phrase around school. Classrooms started changing.

Yeoman Park. Some teachers were already starting to simplify their classrooms, and what could now be seen as a 'pilot study' in one classroom, combined a simpler, stripped out space with possibilities for 'immersive' light, projected images and sound.

Working alongside creative practitioners: the school had been working with Creative Partnerships for a couple of years, and ideas created jointly with staff and creative practitioners were impacting on learning activities in the school. For some staff who had arrived more recently from a Nottingham special school, this relationship, and the accompanying ideas and approaches, had been developing over a number of years.

There is a common misconception that creative ideas and innovation come from an individual spark of genius – the eureka moment. Reality is usually far more complex and less dramatic, and innovation is a much slower and more organic process, usually building on 'platforms' of ideas and practices developing over time. This was certainly the case with this project at Yeoman Park.

The process goes back to early Creative Partnerships and Shepherd School, when John and Kate were at Shepherd, and I was a creative development worker, that was when I first worked with John. Then Kate went over to Yeoman Park.....and then John went there. And John had been developing 'theatre of possibilities'....the idea of a space that held the potential to be multi-sensory and immersive.....so I think it was sort of a process from there. Then combining developing multi-sensory and more open curriculum work with PMLD, with 'theatre of possibility' and practice that was coming into the school....I think that was all coming together at the same time...

There was a space inside Kate's classroom that was a small...media space. And they refurbished that with blinds and a pull down screen, and it was like a small, almost a pilot version....

I can't remember...any negativity....it felt right from the start....there was never any 'what are we going to use this for?'....the process of moving in to it didn't feel like it was a change, it was – yes, that's what I've been trying to do....I was ready for it

It was based on where practice was going – it was a continuation of that, and an enhancement.....

For me, it was basically a continuation of everything we'd been doing in the school for the last two years, and stuff that I'd been involved in before I came to Yeoman Park.....it was a combination in a single location of everything we'd been doing, in a more usable, more versatile space.

INWARD LOOKING – NEED TO LOOK OUTWARDS

Already on a journey exploring new approaches to learning, the school realised that they had reached something of an impasse, that help from outside might be needed to think differently about problems and opportunities. In a strange way, the inward focus of the school was echoed in the physical environment, which had become similarly inward looking.

COMMENTARY

'The fish are always the last to see the water'. When you are immersed in something, day in and day out, it is often difficult to see what might be obvious to someone from outside. Aspects of the school's culture and practice, the physical environment, even the use of language, all become normalised and unquestioned. Fresh eyes and ears can see patterns and notice opportunities, and reflect these back to stimulate fresh thinking and conversations.

Schools can often operate as fairly 'closed' systems, focussed around a comparatively narrow professional culture and practice. This can be a strength in developing a shared vision and sense of purpose, and a resilience to outside pressures. But it can also restrict growth and change, and become a threat to long term sustainability in any organisation. Innovation rarely happens in closed systems. It is the coming together of different people, ideas and practices from different cultures and professions that creates the climate and

NARRATIVE

We needed eyes from outside, we were too close, we had locked ourselves in a mindset, and we needed someone to help us to encourage our thinking, to think in a different way

On that basis we learned that creatives could play a significant part in delivering the curriculum, and that not everything had to be controlled by, directed by teachers....there were other people who had got something to offer...which is a fairly significant lesson to learn....

We'd already broached the subject, but realised it wasn't enough to just work on one space, it really was a whole school project, and it was something we needed an outside eye to help us – we needed some expertise on it, it was beyond our capabilities to do it on our own.

I think that because I came in from outside education...and John and Kate, who had come from Nottingham....we were aware that...we had to prove ourselves to the community, that we were committed to the school and the young people....We were very welcomed...but we had to prove ourselves.....But that newness did create a buzziness...and it had reached a point where quite a lot of people were quite excited about the potential.

opens up the possibility for innovation and change.

The Creative Partnerships (CP) programme has been fostering this cross collaboration between creative practitioners and schools across the country to great effect. Yeoman Park had already started working with artists and other creatives, and through the CP programme had extended this engagement.

Aware of the benefits, but also frustrated by some of the bureaucracy and limitations of the CP programme, the school has continued to involve artists and creative practitioners beyond its formal involvement with CP, and made it a natural part of a creative culture in the school.

This engagement over the years has helped to introduce new ideas to teaching and learning and the learning environment, and challenged practices and attitudes. It has been an important part of an ongoing change process in the school.

Facilitation from outside:

It can be very hard for an organisation to facilitate its own change process. The challenge that outsiders can bring can be useful in helping a school to find creative and engaging ways to involve people in exploring change.

... the understanding that whole school change really needs a massive shift, because shifting habits and patterns that are ingrained....understanding that you do need to bring outside stimulus into that mix, otherwise you don't shift those habits....

....but the school, they were taking on the whole school change as themselves....there was a real sense of ownership. And Creative Partnerships, although it had been a great stimulus, something about the bureaucracy of it got in the way, because you couldn't move in that big timeframe work, the school had to take ownership, otherwise it wouldn't happen.

When we started using a facilitator....we identified that we needed someone external who could come in and talk to all of us...There was a clear mandate from the head teacher to make something exciting happen, but we were in unknown territory.....Traditionally we would have identified the money and bought the space.

The outside thing – it's about facilitation – it's difficult to facilitate something, to be facilitated by somebody you are familiar with because you already have a habitual relationship with them.

Stephen Jon suggested there might be another way. Kate and I were really unsure whether we could please everyone on this project, so we felt we needed a structure for talking.....

People inside the school can often be too close to and invested in current practice to find the distance to facilitate a challenging process. Finding the right person to design and facilitate a process of engagement, set the climate in which people become comfortable exploring new ideas, and identify the right questions and activities to open up conversations can have a huge and positive impact on any process of decision making or change in a school.

Inward looking spaces:

The spaces in the school had, over time, become very 'inward looking' – mirroring in some ways a certain 'inward looking' culture.

This had developed largely through an approach to that focussed on solving individual problems, rather than seeing things in a more holistic way. So, for example, storage sheds had been added to meet storage needs without thinking of their impact on views out. Curtains were being used to reduce overheating and glare without considering the way that this reduced views and connection to the outdoors.

A more holistic approach to space has allowed the whole environment to become much more open.

We started a very fruitful dialogue – I've reflected a lot on that – and I think that skilful facilitation, and the idea of working both physically and conceptually from the ground up hit the social politic of this school...

With everything we do, to have someone facilitate that process, so, so, so helps

The outcomes were based on the questions.....what is its function, what does it feel like...the outcomes were about what it needed to be because it was the right question...steering people in the right direction

With that sense of the heart, as the weeks developed, witnessing how it was being used, sensing that it wasn't a very nice space. It was enclosed, you couldn't see out of it, it was noisy, busy, crowded....That sense leaked down the corridors and into the classrooms.

....one of the things we were aware of was that the space, the environment, and the culture of the school was very inward looking.

2. Process and change

AN OPEN PROCESS

The project was initially conceived in a traditional way as a fairly 'closed' process – we need a dance space and we know where to put it. With support from Creative Partnerships the school took what could have been seen as a huge risk, and embarked on a much more open process, where appropriate solutions would emerge through questions, exploration and dialogue. This was highly unusual for a school – culture in schools is often focussed almost exclusively on clearly defined outputs – and was probably the key to the transformational impact of the project.

COMMENTARY

The whole school Inset day was the start of this open process. While one part of the day looked fairly practically at 'decluttering' the main part focussed on a very open exploration of spaces in the school, and how they might be reimaged.

There was no 'agenda' to this main part of the day in terms of outputs. There was an acceptance that ideas and possible solutions would emerge from conversation and dialogue – that the process was key. This represented quite a leap of faith for the school, and in reflecting on this, the staff member responsible was clearly very nervous about how other staff would respond.

NARRATIVE

It started out as a design really, we had an idea of what we needed...but we really didn't know what we were asking in the beginning...

We didn't know what the outcome was going to be. That's very interesting in terms of a school, because it's not something that most schools would do. In my experience, schools like the things which are known....if they're buying something they want to know what they're getting, what it's going to look like, how they're going to use it.....I think the interesting thing about this project was going into it without that degree of control, and in the end that made it a very creative process because we weren't limited by a particular notion of what that outcome might be.

I think the INSET day we had initially, where we gave staff permission to dream in a non intellectual way...the day skilfully engaged an emotional intelligence from a wide section of school. So it wasn't the teachers in a steering group – who are so very good at making quick fixes, working in crisis, who can be

The process on the day involved four main parts:

1. An initial large scale group 'mapping' of the current school, identifying issues, concerns, and problems –what staff likes and disliked about their current school environment.
2. A creative and open 'blank piece of paper' exercise, using guided visualisation, painting, making and conversation – reimagining the ideal learning environment for the young people at the school.
3. In the light of this open imagining of how things might be, an exploration of how current spaces were used and impacting on students' learning. What we were getting right, what we wanted to improve, and what was missing.
4. Identification of key areas in the school to focus on rethinking or improving, and some initial ideas towards some possible solutions. Critically, the areas to focus on emerged from the earlier conversations on the day, and were identified and worked on, at least initially, by all the staff in the school.

relied upon to offer the best fit given at the time, we're very good at that - but actually we needed to be reminded that reflection is a vital part of any style of design development, making something happen. It was the permission to dream – and a whole day to do it, with no pressure for results. And in a way that set the tone for future conversations.

One of the most important things that struck me that day was giving people permission to have real thoughts...and blue sky thinking...that was very evident, and there were some very simple, strong things that came out of that...

(The impact of the inset day) I think it was really quite huge...quite radical. Most staff consultation, even in a good school like this one.....involves us sitting down for a day and being talked at – so there's a lot of information, but there's no conversation. And I think the inset day has engendered a small culture now of people giving an opinion, a positive opinion.....I think people feel that they have more ownership in the development of their space...that was a huge impact.

For me, I've spent 15, 17 years working in almost crisis situations, the idea that we could slow the school down, make collective thought, seeing that that was possible.

...you're constantly conscious that you're helping something to happen, but you're taking a leap of faith because you're trusting someone's judgement, so you're saying yeah yeah it will be great, this is what we're doing, yes it will be fine, but actually you've got your own doubts....

From this broad and holistic exploration, strategic proposals were developed, and a representative group worked with the architect to develop a design solution.

The choice of area to focus on – the school hall – emerged from whole school dialogue, and the design solution emerged from the dialogue between the architect and a diverse staff working group. The whole process was structured around critical questions that would open up rather than close down conversations, allow people to explore and imagine possibilities, and find common ground and consensus.

The resulting project was very different from the initial 'solution' to meet the need for a dance space, but resulted in a project finely tuned to the needs and aspirations of the school.

Throughout this whole process the head teacher stood back, and trusted staff at all levels, both in the Inset and in the staff working group, were to identify the focus for the project and to find the appropriate solutions.

The open nature of the process has continued as staff have started to take ideas developed through the hall project back into their classrooms and their teaching and learning in other environments.

I remember feeling a bit apprehensive about the process working.....there's always a bit of, is this actually going to work, are people going to respond in a way that will help this to happen. ...People voiced their opinions, but actually the product that came out at the end was about what it really needed to be.....and I found that quite astonishing...it was a bit of an 'oh' – it really, really does work. Nobody felt alienated, everyone felt really engaged and involved...there was very little negativity towards the end of the day. And it wasn't flippant, and it wasn't 'artsy' and valueless.....and it was just right.

I was surprised at how engaged everybody was... it wasn't a guarded approach, and somehow it ended up being...an engaged process, and that surprised me

...when you ask people what do you want it to 'feel' like, you get an agreement...

I wasn't directly involved in that planning and development process....in terms of distributed leadership, we'd nominated a cross section of staff who would be stakeholders on behalf of the whole staff....I received regular updates and was kept informed but they controlled that planning and development work.

INVOLVING ALL

Another crucial part of the process was the commitment of the school, from the start, to involve the whole school community; not just teaching staff, but also other professionals, support staff, office and site staff. This commitment started with the whole school inset, continued with the project working group, and carried through to the staff involved in this learning history. This broad involvement gave access to a rich diversity of ideas and knowledge, invited all staff to think about and take responsibility for students' learning, and contributed towards the further development of a cooperative culture where all voices are valued.

COMMENTARY

The involvement of the whole school staff was fundamental to the success of the project, and had really important consequences across many areas:

1. Ownership: through being involved, all staff had at least a partial stake in the design, and the resulting environment. For some, this was a complete and immediate embrace of the outcome. For others, even though the final design might have been different in some respects from what they might have been expecting, there was a willingness to engage with the space and to learn how to make the most of it

NARRATIVE

Paul, the head teacher. has always moved on by making sure that everyone is involved in what is new, in what affects school

The process consolidated people's belief that they were going to be listened to. It was a slower process, it took account of everyone's opinions

All opinions and contributions to discussions are valued. The value of looking at things from different angles is recognised by the school, and this is appreciated by the staff.

It felt quite easy....what you'd done was a bit, 'Oh, OK, that's a bit different!'.....but it made sense to people because they knew that everybody had been part of the process....yeah, that makes sense because everybody was there and part of that, and it was quite transparent – what we were doing and how we were doing it.

The other key thing is that we had opinions from different standpoints, which is fairly unique. So, there was an educational input...teacher, TA, but then you've got other people looking at it from the standpoint of a site manager who's

2. Getting it right, multiple perspectives: A broad involvement meant that the design benefitted from many different perspectives, from the extremely practical to the more idealistic. It ensured that the completed project met the many different needs of the different people who use the space

thinking 'will I be able to clean this?..will it be practical?', then you've got a budget managerso we had lots of views from different standpoints. That is really valuable, because in terms of its longevity the more people that are interested in it, the more likely it is to last, and be maintained and looked after, because all these people now have got a stake in it.

.... and people who maybe hadn't had conversations directly with each other, were put in a situation where they could express themselves – a TA in the lower school talking to a teacher in the upper school, they'd probably never had a meaningful conversation before, and they could share something like....wouldn't it be nice to have plants, and water.....

I was involved in the meetings at first. We were all there just trying to come up with ideas – how to make the best use of the hall.....There was a lot of discussion, a lot of things came up.....

I get involved in them because certain things might crop up that I'd know about, or I'd need to know what's happening.....

There is a common view across the school, shared by all the office staff that we want 'whatever is best for the students'. Involvement of all the staff in conversations about this project have helped us to understand and share this.

That was a real benefit, because you get a whole mixture of people then – and it's always good to be included...it's very important to us that we are included and are invited to things – it's not the case everywhere...

3. Sharing learning: The process of dialogue between people from different backgrounds and perspectives, and the involvement alongside others in different activities has helped to create greater understanding of what each other do, and why. Through this have come opportunities to learn from each other to challenge and improve practice

It wasn't a compromise of needs, it was a bringing together of ideas

What I remember was surprise that everybody else felt the same way that we did about it....I thought everybody would be talking more about their classrooms...I was quite taken aback that everybody had a real issue with the hall.... it hadn't really dawned on me....

4. Changing culture: through broad involvement, a culture is developing where all voices are valued, and where people are starting to understand that everyone has a part to play in creating learning opportunities for the children at the school

...I was quite surprised, I was surprised at how much consensus there was...different voices had been allowed to be heard...there was a huge consensus....well, it's really obvious isn't it, because everybody seemed to be saying exactly the same thing....

I was involved with the Inset day, exploring the vision, as if it was a new school – it was really interesting. What was really noticeable was that different groups all had very similar ideas.

A practical process with real meaning:

This broad involvement was made easier by making it a very practical process. Everyone felt able, and qualified to contribute to conversations about practical problems and issues that affected their daily lives. Solutions were being explored for the practical problems of movement around the school without disrupting activities, storage etc as well as the creation of appropriate learning environments. At the same time, an understanding that they were being listened to and trusted that things would change as a result of their contributions, made people more willing to be involved.

In this way, the whole school staff were involved in conversations about learning, from which they might otherwise have felt excluded or unqualified to contribute.

There was a lot of practical discussion about space, and I think that was partly to do with the structure of the day...doing things, like making models and things, which opened up possibilities. There was a real sense came out of it of what was possible. For a lot of people the conceptual is all a bit pie in the sky and 'yes but what does that mean for us?'

I remember us making our models....I remember....you tend to have ideas that are very similar to someone from the same background, and whenever we do anything with education it is always really obvious that we're from a different background....not so artistic....much more practical, doers. It was very noticeable to me that my thoughts were always around the practical, and people were talking more of....different slants on it....making it more aesthetically pleasing and things like that, that perhaps don't come to me....If I'd been sitting there with a room full of therapists we all would have been going for the practical side of things.

There was a nice mixture – there was the dreaming element, the imaginative 'what can we do?', and there were practical things – a corridor could go here, we could keep the light...- that helped us change our thinking about the space

CHANGING CULTURE THROUGH DOING AND SEEING

A small group of staff at the school had been exploring and pioneering new approaches to learning for students with profound and multiple learning difficulties, and developing less cluttered 'blank canvas' learning environments, open to multiple possibilities, to support this learning. These are radical departures from perceived wisdom about learning and learning environments for these students. Involving everyone in the school in the conversations about this project started the process of spreading these ideas beyond the initial 'pioneers', but equally important has been the sharing that has happened through other staff seeing and experiencing the new approaches. The location of the media learning environment at the heart of the school, and in the same space used for assemblies, dining and other whole school activities has contributed to this sharing of practice through doing and seeing.

COMMENTARY

Changing culture and practice is extremely challenging. Some people are able to rethink and reframe practice and ideas conceptually and intellectually. Others are able to independently reflect on their own practice, and innovate and experiment to find new ways forward. Even those who can be creative and innovative in this way almost always rely on collaboration and sharing with other people.

Most people, however, engage best with new ideas and approaches through practical involvement – seeing ideas in action, working alongside others, trying things for themselves.

This project, throughout the process, gave people lots of opportunities to make sense of and start to engage with

NARRATIVE

We used Creative Partnerships for the period of time we needed to for them to change the culture in the school in terms of using creatives, and once we'd got that groundswell, started to change that culture we could then move on to taking responsibility for that work ourselves, which is where we are I think now.

There was still a bit of wariness about what I was doing, which was quite different from what they might have expected dance to be, like taking all the children out of their chairs and onto the floor...but staff were pretty ready to go along, and at least try it.....

That first project with Debi, I know set a wonderful precedent, because the music teacher was very excited. Paul, the Head teacher was very excited....because... he comes from a PE background, and he'd never considered dance as being a form of PE....and so some of the other staff were going – oh, we want a bite of this cake...

new ideas about learning and environments that one or two teachers had already started to develop.

Work with creative practitioners through Creative Partnerships had brought different ways of doing things into the school, and different staff working alongside these practitioners had helped staff to experience alternative ways to think about and develop creative learning activities with the children

Before the Inset, one of the classrooms had been developed, within the constraints of the space and technology available, as an uncluttered 'blank canvas' environment with controllable lighting and multimedia projection. Some staff had had opportunities to work in this space. At the Inset this space was used for some of the conversations and activities, giving a broader group the opportunity to experience its potential.

The Inset also gave people the opportunity to experience a more open ended and facilitative approach to learning. This in many ways reflected or modelled the more student focussed approach to learning, open to emerging opportunities and possibilities, being developed by some staff.

We had a declutterer in at the same time, and really, I saw no impact from that...we tried in an awful lot of ways, we had sculpture days, we were going to make sculpture out of junk....skips....we were going to get rid of everything...and people wouldn't do it, people would not do it. Once people started working in the media learning environment, the new hall, and they realised how little they needed, but it was important to have quality artefacts or resources, the penny started to drop. People realised that richer assets, but fewer of them, made for more learning opportunities.

I think other staff have come more and more on board with using image and colour. And some are really into video work, and seeing the possibilities...and have really developed skills. I think there's been a lot of movement.

I don't know whether people quite get it...we've worked on it.....some people get it, but you do have to go over it again and again and again....its got better.....I think people get the technology bit, and they've learnt subtlety in the way they do that – they get the aesthetic of what they are doing...its about learning that bit, but learning the craft of using the space as well

I think very quickly, once people saw the room in action, I think immediately they got it....walking into it cold was shocking, but once it was in use, people definitely immediately understood its purpose and its value

The completed project has given more staff the possibility to experience and contribute to this new and different approach to teaching and learning, with support, guidance and coaching from more experienced staff and practitioners, and to see the impact on learning outcomes for the children.

Other staff using the hall for different activities – PE, physiotherapy, music – have been able to experiment with the environment and the possibilities for their practice in the environment.

Visibility – at the heart of the school

The project has been developed in the school hall, right at the heart of the school. This has been really important to the impact it has had throughout the school.

Often, spaces to accommodate new activities and approaches will be added at the edge of the main school, or will be pushed out to an underused space somewhere else in the school – and pockets of creative innovation will develop almost in isolation from the main

...all the staff now are quite happy in these environments, they found their style within it. They've seen outcomes – that's the acid test here – do the staff see a change in the students they're with day in day out?

And I think that the excellent practitioners that we have got, and the way they have used that room, and the way they have coached other members of staff in using that room – and I mean coaching in lessons as well as outside lessons – I think that has had a significant impact on people's opinion.

I do think it's changed a lot, by having a space like the hall, people are more aware of the simple things – which should be common practice...

There were a lot of people heading in that direction, and there were people that I never thought would even consider going for it, were actually embracing the idea. People were a lot more receptive than I would have thought.

My first experience of the hall was the first time I went into Yeoman Park School, when I had lunch with some of the children, so my first sense of the hall was at the heart of the school – and it was all chaotic, busy...it was a very typical school hall.....it was the throbbing heart of the school.

In the old days the school hall was a crossroads where nothing was happening.....now it is almost a sacred space...the space has become much bigger than the sum of its parts

So, ... it is at the centre of the school, and it does feel that, because, geographically it is in the centre, it's really nice that it's a place that people

school culture. Here, the innovation is highly prominent at the heart of the school.

Everyone has had a direct experience of the opportunities and possibilities of the space, and the effectiveness of a visually clean and clutter free environment, through the use of the space for assemblies, dining and other whole school activities.

All staff, teaching and non teaching, as well as parents and other visitors are able to hear, and sometimes see activities. It is high profile and high impact.

Interestingly, the space when it was first completed was closed off with a curtain but no door. This made activities inside more visible, but also made it more difficult to contain the activities in the hall. The curtain has now been replaced by a door, which has helped the teachers and practitioners inside the hall, but has made the innovative practice less visible to others in the school.

come in to, so that people can access it easily...people come into it central to the space from where they are, so it feels like it's at the heart of what the school's doing, philosophically as well as geographically.

...it's very central, it's become the heart of this school. it's become a central focus. It's also become the place where we meet. We tend to meet in the round – the whole school, the staff, various groups, a whole school twilight session or meeting....

It's really good that the space is at the centre of the school – people passing by, including visitors are more aware of what is going on. It impacts more on the school in this central location.

You get the impression that everybody's happy with the hall. You don't see a lot of what's going off inside there I know they do a lot in there, John does a lot with his music and his drums....you hear it but you don't see it...

The fact that it's now private in some ways stops you seeing a bit – you could peek through the curtains before. You hear bits or whatever.....you don't really see what's happening.....It's a mystery to me what they're doing. I haven't really seen, apart from when I have actually gone into a session, I haven't seen what people are doing...

DISTURBANCE

This project, even though staff were extensively involved in the process, created some significant 'disturbance' or 'turbulence'. This is important in any change process. People need to be shocked, challenged or otherwise discomforted, to be able to reframe current assumptions and rethink appropriate practice; but to encourage appropriate responses, this disturbance needs to be in the context of a supportive environment or 'climate'.

COMMENTARY

Even though they had been involved in the process of developing ideas and solutions for the hall, the final appearance was still a shock to quite a lot of people.

For some, this shock was positive – it was a surprise, but a pleasant surprise, and they were quickly able to see the potential of the space. For others the shock was more profound, it wasn't what they expected and they didn't particularly like it.

Disturbance like this is important. In the right climate or context, it can encourage people to see things differently, and to rethink attitudes, ideas and practices. In the wrong climate it can shut people down and make them even more resistant to change.

NARRATIVE

I remember the staff....people were in there as if they had wandered into a fine art installation piece. They were looking around at the space with open mouths.....and some people were wowed out by the whole thing. They were thinking this is amazing, this is a huge piece of space – we could do anything here. Other people were 'I don't like it, I don't like it'.....it didn't look like something that some people had ever seen, they'd never seen anything like it, even though they'd been instrumental in visioning it.

I was aware of conversations going on, and I knew that when the hall was first changed there was a bit of ... wariness, or 'what's this' from some of the staff, and I think particularly when John and Kate started to take that into the classrooms, and strip the classrooms down of lots of colourful work everywhere.....I was aware of a kind of wariness there....this wasn't how a classroom should be, and what about the children's work everywhere?

I think there was a real mixture of shock, horror, awe, approval...there were a fair combination of reactions to it. I think those who had been involved in it,

Importantly, the right climate had been created here. People had been involved in the process, so already had some sense of ownership (some more than others), and they knew that the new space had been developed through staff involvement and not imposed from above. Some staff immediately started to explore and realise the potential of the space, and their enthusiasm became infectious. Other staff had opportunities to experience the use of the space and to see the impact it had on children's learning. All staff have been able to experience the effect the space has had on the environment and children's behaviour in assemblies and at lunch times.

There is now a strong awareness of the positive impact that the new environment can have for staff and students, and the space is generally appreciated and valued by everyone.

theirs was one of affirmation – this is what we thought it would look like, and it does – those that hadn't been involved in the planning process, I think, were much more shocked...the sparseness...I think they were shocked because it wasn't the kit type refurbishment that they were used to, they couldn't see....all they saw was a blank room, and I think people weren't expecting that....so I think culturally, it was quite a big shock for a number of people....it was interesting the look on some people's faces, some people definitely didn't like it....

The first time I came in after it was finished was probably not last January but the January before....I came in and I was quite surprised....because, what I expected from my experience as a dance professional is a black space, which feels very cosy and exciting and comfy, and I know where I am, and I thought 'ooh, what's this?'. And it feels as you go in...a kind of cool... impact... because it is very white.....

I don't think the shock value should be underestimated, I think if you are going to change a culture you need a degree of turbulence, and I think people need to be shocked, and realise...this is a change.....I think then it comes down to the level of support you give people to get their heads around that change, and to work with it.

3. Impact and outcomes

OPEN SPACE / OPEN TO POTENTIAL

As explored above, this project was characterised by its open process, open to different possibilities and outcomes. The space itself has these same characteristics, inviting a wide variety of different uses and approaches, and opportunities to explore active engagement of the students in their own learning. Continuing the theme of openness, the qualities of the space give it a physical sense of openness, light and calm with a re-established a connection to the outside,— a space where you can breathe.

COMMENTARY

The space that emerged from this project is very unusual for a school. It is a genuinely 'blank canvas'.

Neutral, light background colours allow the lighting to set and explore different coloured environments and moods, or provide immersion in projected images as appropriate to a wide range of learning activities. These can be set to run automatically, be adapted through the course of an activity to respond to or stimulate students' reactions, or be triggered by the students' direct actions.

NARRATIVE

A lot of people say 'it looks so rich' – it looks classy, it looks new, like a gallery – it has a feeling of 'about to happen'

I just remember thinking yeah, yeah, that's it – wow! ...and it's so different and it's so right...

My initial response was – wow! I couldn't believe the transformation. I was in awe...

I am proud to show people, it looks nice, challenges preconceived ideas, is sophisticated, calm, beautiful....

I think the best single way of describing it is as an open space...it is a space of possibilities. I'm used to a school hall or a dance studio being in a black space...so it was quite a surprise to me to see that it was a white space.

(what makes it work) I have to say, quite literally, it's blank. Previously it was...a standard school hall, now it's a blank canvas and that means it can be used for anything and everything.

The space is free of visual distractions or 'clutter', allowing all the focus to be on the people in the room and their actions, emotions and responses, or on specific artefacts or objects of interest and exploration.

It is a space where people can be encouraged to imagine and dream, where you can be 'virtually' transported to different environments, cultures, places..... a 'classroom without walls'.

It is also a generous space, where there is an invitation to move, to stretch out and explore personal space. It is free of furniture and other obstructions which enables staff to explore the use of the floor with cushions and rugs to provide a more relaxed environment where students' movements and responses can become less restricted and more autonomous.

So that's what I find exciting, the fact that it's open, there are all sorts of possibilities

It's the emptiness of it... I think teachers equate warm happy atmospheres with things everywhere, but actually going in the opposite direction opens up a world of possibilities, and also flexibility for the whole school...

This allows me to be more courageous than I have ever been. I've realised that by being able to make some sort of a 'theatre of possibilities' – an environment where things can happen - it can be very structured, very focussed and very open at the same time. And that's been a liberation.

The space is incredibly neutral...the people within it are able to generate emotional responses

...definitely the value of a pared down space, whether you're working with people with profound learning difficulties or people with autism, the pared down space is the only way you can get people to be engaged in the thing that you are doing...you realise how much distraction and how much visual noise there is in your classroom, all the time

15 years ago the prevailing idea in education for people with complex needs was that they needed stimulating.....people in wheelchairs who couldn't move their heads away had the visual dissonance....when I think about it now, we were deeply ignorant really. Not malicious, well intentioned but ill informed.

Certainly at lunchtime, when the blinds are open, and you can see outside, and you can get outside, the hall doesn't feel so enclosed, so it has a very different feeling when it is a part of the outside space....

This openness is encouraging teachers to work in ways that are increasingly open; shared journeys with the students that are shaped more by their responses to different stimuli than by a predetermined lesson plan.

It is a space that, with the blinds down, can be inward focussed, but with the blinds open becomes more outward looking - light and airy with connection to trees and sky beyond. Electronic blinds allow these different environments to be easily established, and for one teacher it has now become a ritualised ending to lessons for the blinds to be slowly opened as children re-emerge from their imagined world into the real world.

The general space, and airiness of it....the lighting and media.... it's open...there's a lot of room for the children to go in and feel, still safe, but space to explore in their own little environment.... personal space....They're going in and it's (draws in breath) what's going to happen?.. And it's quiet and no talking, the session is set up already, and it starts...They are ready then to learn.

I've used it as a practitioner. I absolutely love its flexibility, the purity and clarity of it.

Different people.....John would finish his lesson by opening the blinds, Kate would finish a lesson by just putting a different light on, and maybe different music...people can do their different things...in different ways.

We could do it in the light....you don't have to hide things... by darkening it. On one occasion we had the blinds open to let the daylight in, on another we had the space lit and closed off the outside space, so there's that flexibility.

And with the new generation of LED lights you can very quickly flood it and make it a very immersive environment. And the same thing with projecting – you are projecting.... onto a whole white wall.....instead of a screen coming down...with a single, smaller image, let alone four walls where you get that immersion.

A classroom without walls, I never really understood that....but the new hall has...done that. I've seen lots of different teachers do sessions in there, and it really does enable them to have a classroom without walls. The impact it has on pupils in that respect is wonderful.

It is also a truly multi-functional space, used for many different areas of the curriculum as well as whole school gatherings, performances, assemblies, social occasions and dining. For each of these, the lighting, the blinds, the audio, the movable screens can all be used to help to establish the appropriate environment.

...I've worked with all sorts of things – it might be 'sea', it might be 'journey' and to be able to create the environment...is fantastic. Especially, children with learning difficulties, you can say 'water' as much as you like, but it doesn't necessarily mean anything... ..introducing that dimension has a huge impact on their experience, on their learning.

I think maybe, although I do find the white bright...the fact that it is a clear space...I think from our point of view it's probably quite good, because we used to have quite a lot of displays on the wall...which now we don't have...And if you were walking someone they could grab out...so I actually think I prefer it without any frills....

I was well aware of the capabilities of doing this before we even began it.... the power of these things because there's nothing else there...I'd known about it for a long time, but it's one of those things that's always quite overwhelming when you see it.

...we didn't get the dance studio – we got liberation.

STUDENTS LEARNING

The new MLE and the activities developed in it have had a profound effect on learning in the school, on the understanding of the environments and activities that can actively engage students, and on an approach that recognises that staff and students are learning together. Perhaps even more importantly they have completely changed perceptions and expectations of the students' abilities and their capacity to engage over extended periods of time.

COMMENTARY

Experiences within the MLE are having a profound impact on the staff's understanding and expectations of the students, especially those with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

The most profound of these has been on attention span and concentration. Where previously keeping a student's attention for more than five minutes had been a major achievement, students are now remaining engaged and involved for a full 45 minute lesson. It is allowing teachers to question whether the students' apparent short attention span might have more to do with the environment and their own approaches to teaching and learning.

NARRATIVE

For me as a teacher it is deeply fulfilling... it's entirely appropriate for the learners that we are trying to reach

The students though.....it's the increased level of concentration and engagement. And we have some extremely challenging children in terms of concentration and reaction to environment. Children who would do 5-10 minutes in a classroom were suddenly doing 45 minutes to an hour in this environment

The ability to gain their interest and maintain their interest over longer periods of time....as a means of engaging them it's absolutely terrific. That level of engagement and the speed at which you can get that engagement...and looking at how they can concentrate over longer and longer periods of time, that ability to focus on something for an extended period of time is a wonderful asset for teachers.

The majority of our children find learning so difficult, and by helping them, in an environment that is calm and not fussy...you're giving them that opportunity...to learn. Sometimes they've got hurdles to get over in an environment before they can even start to learn.....

There has also been a profound reassessment of just how much the students are able to absorb, observe and understand. Students are now being seen as far more engaged and aware of other people and the world around them.

This has led to a reappraisal of communication. In a world where words or text have little or no meaning, the MLE is giving staff the opportunity to explore different types of connection and communication, through shared gestures, exchanged rhythms, or physical and emotional responses to objects, textures, colours, lights and sounds.

For me, personally, it's a place where words are unnecessary, it has a feeling of communion, of learning together. The children are not vessels we are going to pour learning into, they are as likely to teach us something.

...having space around people.....can enable them to be more autonomous in their learning, because you're not in their face, you're not sat right next to them, they're actually in their own space, and allowed to respond...it often then feels quite claustrophobic in any other environment.

...just by choosing the colour you want the room to be, and putting the music on...they're coming in to an environment, so the moment they walk in the door, you can see their senses prick up, their eyes and ears...'what are we coming in to?'...So I think they're learning from the moment they walk in....

I saw a stunning lesson the other day...with a pool of red light in the middle of darkness, and some masks were being introduced into the red light, one at a time, with children who would have thrown them at a wall if they'd been given them in a classroom...they were caught up in the magic of the object....so we have to keep reminding ourselves of the power of less, or of presentation.....most of our children are not text users, many do not have language in a conventional sense so we are looking at a shared reality, a shared conversation of learning that often comes through object, or gesture, or the emotionality of a colour, the feel of a texture

We've been able to get out into the world in a way we couldn't before....Some people use the hall for narrative, for the telling of stories in a dramatic way – it became a theatre for stories, with children helping to direct, or being part of the story. We went into the book – literally.....Some people used it for getting out, for showing – showing history – a stunning lesson of first world war soldiers going over the top in the trenches.....We've visited countries, we go out to different places – we can go out to a spice market, we can travel above deserts in

The environment has also made a difference to the quality of monitoring and assessment of the students' learning. The cleaner space, the lack of visual or aural distraction, all make it easier to observe and assess responses, reactions and learning.

a plane, we can go under the sea. Getting out into the community is a big challenge to us.....but this is a lens onto the world, we can get out. And the staff have enjoyed that as much as students – when we are in that environment, we are all learning, it becomes more of a discovery to all of us – the colours, the sounds of another country.

One of the great things about the space and what you can do in there....is let them do their own thing and stand back and observe it. The longer you can do that the more they are going to get into it, and the more they get into it the more you can pick up from them.....let the students express themselves.

It's allowed us to look at assessment – what a child can do in certain spaces – It's allowed us to look at behaviours and responses to environments....it has helped us to look at the set of learners that we set out to look at at the beginning of this whole journey, how can we help them to learn?

The children respond much better. The atmospheres that you can create really do affect some of the children in different ways.....self awareness....you can actually see how far they can look and track....we can monitor their progression in different things.

It reaches all the learning styles of our students and for many of us it accommodates our different teaching styles, and that, I suggest, is a rare combination

It changes expectations...things that they are learning about pupils is changing expectations, enabling them to set more challenging targets for them.....that's terrific, because that's about raising standards

It's a learning tool ultimately.....it's a tool to help us engage learning

SCHOOL ORGANISATION

As well as its impact on learning as a multi media learning environment, the project has also effectively addressed many of the practical issues that were identified through the initial engagement of staff at the start of the process, particularly that of circulation around the school while still retaining the role of the hall as the central meeting place for the school. It has also, more surprisingly, had a number of unexpected benefits, with the environment created within the hall providing opportunities to improve a whole range of other specialist and whole school activities within the space.

COMMENTARY

The school hall had been a very difficult space to use. At the centre of the school, it was also the main circulation route between different parts of the school, suffered from glare and overheating in the sunshine, had inadequate storage, and was blocked up with clutter and furniture. It was a multi-use environment that was fit for purpose for none of its uses.

To create the MLE, it was necessary to solve the practical problems posed by these conflicting demands.

NARRATIVE

The moving wall has made a big impact on us being able to get round school, we used to come in school....because there was something going off in hall you couldn't actually get anywhere...you had to wait. You might wait half an hour just to get somewhere.

It is highly practical – the screen is wonderful – it contains the environment and there are no distractions. You can now get around school without disturbing activities in the hall. Everyone is benefitting

I was surprised at the finished product. The wavy wall corridor is really effective, the whole thing is really good.....

I was impressed by how large it was – I thought the corridor would make the hall seem a lot smaller, but for our purposes it didn't make any differences at all.

.....the lack of distraction enables me to provide a focus for my lessons which is undisturbed, and that is wonderful...

The main thing that has changed has been the privacy, and you don't hear people walk by....There's more people out in the playground now, but that's not a problem, in fact some of

The introduction of a folding screen, a new corridor, reconfigured storage, an external canopy and electronic blinds have all addressed these problems, and turned it into an extremely practical space.

It can still be used for assemblies and whole school gatherings, but when needed the screen can be moved across and lessons and activities in the hall are undisturbed, while others are able to move freely around the school.

More unexpectedly, the changes have had a major effect on other activities in the hall.

Lunch times, previously noisy, chaotic and rushed, have now become calmer and more relaxed. Lights and music are used to make a calmer environment, and the movable screen, partly

our children like to see the other children....I think it's quite nice for the less physically able children to see the other children running around....

If there's less distractions for us, there's less distractions for them.....because it was so constant, people didn't say excuse me because it was another disruption...

Lunchtimes, it was very fortuitous, because it wasn't planned, but that dividing wall, it worked perfectly because it created a visual barrier to the serving, which was always a distraction, it created a natural flow....it solved a lot of the issues we had at lunchtime.

Lunch time was a horrid time. It was a time when teaching assistants would say it's their worst time in the day – the noise, the surprises, the rush, the cluttered, horrible space it used to be.....an old school hall....too much colour, too much tat....Lunch time now is very calm. We control the colour of the light, whether we have the blinds up or down, whether we put the awnings out....we can do all sorts of things to control the environment, it's a much calmer and more peaceful time. I don't think we expected that either...we had no idea that it would change lunch time – that was a great gift...staff and students are much happier at lunchtime.

Dinner time's nice. We just have a set lighting on with the blinds up.... that's very calm...

As a blank canvas, in regards to lunch...for example they augment the environment with lighting...the lighting changes the colour of the room and as a result changes the overall mood of the space.

It's being given the permission to relax and enjoy, rather than being on a functional conveyor belt. You wouldn't think it would work, but it does. And it's quite lovely that the children can go from that space at lunch, and then over lunch time go into the outside learning environment – so the energy in school flows rather nicely now

extended, provides a visual and aural barrier to the clutter and sounds of the servery.

Similarly, assemblies have been transformed by the calmer environment, the use of coloured lighting and music to establish mood and context, and the display potential of the digital media projectors.

Other lessons and activities are also benefitting not only from the privacy and lack of disturbance, but from the unforeseen potential of coloured lighting, projection and sound.

The biggest problem, now that the hall has become a genuinely multi-functional space, is that too many people want to use it and timetabling is becoming difficult.

Assembly's nice.....lighting's on.... effects....we have got the projectors on...it runs a lot smoother.....a lot more calm. It's green lighting we use for assembly, so lots of the children know it's assembly time, and music...so we also work with routines

Same thing for assembly. It enables a whole school to sit in a room and to really get the conditions right for an assembly, which is probably one of the most difficult things to do, to get all our pupils together in one room and to get their attention....everything is generated visually and that maintains their focus....it works beautifully

When assembly is done we go for this pale green colour to illuminate everything because it does have a calming effect.....

And its across the range, it's not just expressive type lessons.....I teach PE in there, and teaching PE is better with the room configured the way it is. The variety of lesson it has enhanced in there is remarkable, and it's certainly gone beyond my expectations. I had a sort of fairly fixed view of what would be delivered...most of it along the expressive arts type lesson. But actually staff have used it for all sorts of different types of lessons across the curriculum...it's much more flexible than I expected it to be.

And it's allowed us to use it in the evening, for afterschool.....

The hall is used for media stuff, it's used for lunch, it's used for assembly, it's used for PE, it's used for physiotherapy, it's used for almost anything and everything....it is quite literally the most versatile classroom in the school.

I get a sense that maybe people are using the space more than they used to....so there may be more people placing demands, so the logistics and organisation are possibly even harder than it was....

4. Learning and moving on

OVERALL COHERENCE – PROCESS, DESIGN, LEARNING

One of the things that has marked out this project has been an overall coherence, philosophically and practically, between the design of the process, the design of the space, and the approaches to learning developing in the space. This approach can usefully be applied to a whole range of other projects in the school.

COMMENTARY

The process of developing the project, the qualities of the design, and the approach to learning that are developing in the school (and indeed the use of a learning history to reflect on these) have an overall coherence, and share a number of key characteristics.

Engagement – multiple perspectives: the recognition and belief that all voices are valuable, that everyone has something to contribute and will benefit from being involved. That outcomes are better if diversity and multiple perspectives are welcomed and celebrated. That we can all be involved, whatever our backgrounds, status or

NARRATIVE

It was a fundamental change in the direction of school

What we've not done enough of...is engaging in that same process for when we do everything....it needs to be done right, not quickly. Its making sure that we continue to value that...we've done it with the hall....making sure that we hold on to the value of how the process helped us make something that actually has really, really worked well.

A lot of the work has been fantastic...and how it's shifted how we're working.....but for me the most powerful thing has been the process, and how we need to engage with other professionals to provide certain things for us, and go beyond education....we wouldn't have got that hall...its not about the money, it's not about people's skills and vision as teachers....its about the process that we engaged with that we wouldn't have done without the Creative Partnerships money, we wouldn't have got to that point without you facilitating the process. And we need to hold on to that, and it's not just in this context, it's in other things that we do as well...you spend a bit of money but you get value in what you do and the way you work.

perceived capabilities, in making our world and shaping our future.

Trust: that if we trust people, they will always surprise us with their capabilities, creativity and engagement. That if we trust an open, facilitated process, we will always be surprised by the outcomes.

Emergence: that the best ideas, innovations, practice and learning will 'emerge' from an open process that invites engagement. That it is better to start with an open agenda (within a clear structure and process), open to different possibilities, directions or journeys, than to work to a closed plan.

There is a growing understanding in the school that this approach, while possibly taking longer and requiring a bigger commitment of time and resources, can produce results that are far more effective, and ultimately, better value for money.

I think the fact that we all got together, and everybody talked about it was very beneficial, and I wonder if different bits around the school shouldn't be pulled together more like that.

...if everyone has had a say, and everyone has been involved in the process, then when it's actually complete the ownership is there, and people know what it's about, know what it's for and will use it. So I think that's a really important principle that goes across all types of development work.

It needs.....all stakeholders need to have a stake in that change, it has to come out of everybody's will, desire, pleasure, enthusiasm.....

It is distributed leadership, it's about empowering people to take part in the decision making process, and accepting the outcomes without having to change them – giving people the power to make decisions. It's doing it without the power of veto of the headteacher.....they take on board the responsibility. That creates the culture.

I think, more and more, the idea of working with a blank canvas is permeating the culture of the school. If you looked at the next project, the outdoor play area, quite clearly, in a different way, we went for another blank canvas.....the lessons we learned from that project have filtered through to the outdoor play environment. If you look at how classrooms are developing, again it's through that blank canvas idea. The Sensit Room is a replacement for the multi-sensory room.....It's all adding to this move towards flexible working environments where the teacher has to plan and deliver....the kit isn't driving that lesson, the teacher's planning is driving that lesson, and I think that's really significant in raising standards of teaching and learning.

NEXT STEPS: MOVING ON

Much has changed in the practice of the school, the understanding of how children learn, and the expectations of what they are capable of. There is also a recognition that more needs to be done to extend the practice, and that this might lead to challenges to the structure and approach of the current school curriculum

COMMENTARY

The experience of using the MLE is leading to rethinking of the curriculum and timetabling in the school.

The 45 minute lesson time is starting to feel too short to effectively explore different themes and ideas with the students, and possibilities are being explored of blocking longer periods of time, or even looking at a whole day or days to extend the scope and possibilities of learning in the environment.

Teachers and creative practitioners working with the school are also starting to use the space to rethink how they work and push the boundaries of their

NARRATIVE

I would spend longer time – suddenly 45 minutes is gone- people are in a journey, and bringing people out of that journey needs an awful lot of skill –so the timing has to be quite precise....like delivering a theatre piece...

It may be that school thinks about longer lesson times, but that would be quite a radical and original conversation because traditionally school was divided up like a pizza, and we would probably have to look at individual learners or groups of individual learners which would challenge the way we structure classes....age groups. So I think the space continues to challenge us...people keep coming up with other ways of using it.

I'm wondering about changing the way we use the hall in terms of time – a whole day, or even two days when we story for two days with an artist or musician, and we seek out into the outside environment, and we have a journey, an experience, that takes us even further out of present time and space. We could explore history, we could time travel...

I've always approached MLD and PMLD work with as many senses as possible...bringing things in to feel and hold and smell.... and am thinking continually about the new possibilities.... interacting with images...with shadow play and movement, and students learning from their own movement and the shadow.....just all of that learning around movement and image...

normal practice, exploring the new potentiality of the space.

Practice from the MLE is also starting to filter back into the classroom in the way that lessons are planned and issues explored.

The approach used for the hall/ MLE project has also been used again more recently by the school in exploring and redesigning the outdoor learning environment and the physiotherapy pool.

The group of staff who have participated in this learning history have reflected on the project and learning from it, and have identified the following activities to keep things moving forward:

- Providing opportunities for non teaching staff to experience activities within the MLE, and to see the impact on students and their learning

I learned to look at.....when we were in an actual lesson, not to be actually bounding about. Because the space is so clear and you are very visible....It made me aware of what my movements were....low, and quiet...making sure that the person doing the session is the one they are watching.

Its just made me annoyed with doing things in the classroom, because it just feels a bit...clumsy....it makes you realise what the limitations of the classroom are....it will only lead to improving what we do in the classroom....maybe it has influenced other people a bit more in how they see their classroom...

I still think there's a lot of work to be done. The teachers that are using that room, most, I think all teachers are using that space, but there's still a lot to be learned in terms of teaching practice, pedagogy.....we really have only scratched the surface of that so far. When we get round to curriculum review, part of that...will be looking at pedagogy and how we are delivering aspects of that curriculum. There's a lot of continuing professional development and curriculum development work that needs to go on to enhance our use of that space.

.... a space where we can use light and music, but we have been very slow in doing those things, but we are getting there.....that's something for the future.....

It annoys me when people go in there put the fluorescent lights on, and do something that doesn't need to happen in there...why don't you make use of the lights, why don't you put some music on, why don't you make it a bit different...interesting? We're a bit stuck...it involves us working together...a reappraisal of where we're at and where we want to go next. And again I think that process needs to be led and directed...we're just getting stuck again.

Rebound... that's nice in there. It could be used possibly in a bit more of a positive way...that's getting the staff to know what they're doing...I think that could be made a lot calmer....They

- Exploring ways to support other teaching staff to develop the skills and understanding of approaches developed within the MLE to inform their own practice
- Starting a project to look at classroom spaces and investigate how the learning from the MLE might change how classroom spaces are organised, decorated, equipped and used
- Learn from the process of the project: to consistently start other projects with the involvement of users, allowing time to dream, approaching projects as research, and inviting eyes from outside. This approach links to the upcoming curriculum review, the engagement agenda, trans professional working and enquiry based leadership.

always have the blinds open and the lights on bright, and sometimes I think it's a little too much for the kids...I think it would be nice just to have a subtle light on and a little background music.

The bit we've not done yet, it would be really good now to get the non teaching staff into some sessions in there to actually see it in action – I think that's probably a mistake on our behalf that we've not enabled that to happen yet – and it's something we should have done when it was complete, it would have been good for those who had been involved in it to see it working. That's something that we need to remedy and will remedy.

I'd like to see more staff having the opportunities to go in, and actually teachers having the confidence – because it's daunting, technology.....if I don't make that session run right, the whole thing goes to pot, no matter how well Kate teaches it.... Simple guidelines and guidance for staff...

OUR SOLUTION – AND SHARING

There is a lot from this project that people want to share with other schools, teachers and practitioners, and a lot of interest has already been shown from outside the school. But there is also a real concern that people won't recognise the importance of the process, that the physical 'product' that has emerged from the process is specific to Yeoman Park's own specific circumstances and journey.

COMMENTARY

The new hall / MLE has produced a lot of interest from other schools, teachers and creative practitioners. Many people have visited, seen the space in use, and been impressed.

The school are keen to share their learning and practice with others, but feel that there is a danger in this, if visitors just see the new environment as a product or 'piece of kit'.

One thing that the school are very clear about is that the product of this process – the redesigned hall / MLE is a specific response to a specific set of issues and stage of a journey that the school were already on.

NARRATIVE

I would like to open debate about who is using it and how. I would like to share it, or share the idea of this space, because it has transformed our school for relatively little money

It is two years old now, and it still feels fresh...it's still a new tool and we're still exploring it....I think there are an awful lot of schools who could benefit from a space like this....

You get a lot of people who see some of the stuff and they're kind of awestruck by it...they think it is an aesthetic thing, and they forget it's....all for a reason.....it's never really recognised like that

It's something that I worry about, because I can see people who come in and look at it and want it, but they don't know why they want it. So they'll come in and see it, see it in action, and they'll think it's wonderful...but I worry that it becomes another piece of kit on somebody's list....and I just wonder – they'll end up with a blank room and then what? And that I find worrying because what they don't see is what's gone in to developing it and making it happen – and actually the process is far more important than anything else, because that's what makes it work.....That room is the outcome of all that process and people don't see it. They come in from the outside and all they see is the room, or the performance... I find that quite disturbing.

More important....was having a conversation that got to the bottom of the school's needs. Many people have come across and have wanted to 'buy' the 'product' – but the greatest tragedy...is

It is the process that leads to this that needs to be shared with, and understood by, other schools, teachers and practitioners. A part of this is the recognition that a similar process, with a different school will almost inevitably lead to a completely different project with different outcomes, that will be far better suited to the needs of the school than a replication of the Yeoman Park MLE.

to invest in something that no-one ends up using. My problem here is a happy problem – I can't get everyone in who wants to use it.

I don't want people coming in, seeing what's happening in that room and thinking it's the answer, because it's not. It's our answer, it's not their answer, and if they went through the same process, they might produce something completely different, but that would be right for them.

I am very committed to the idea of 'process' leading....for a lot of schools that's quite difficult to comprehend until you've experienced it. And if you say 'come and see what this school have done', they will go in....and see the product, so they don't get the sense of that process. So that's a big question.....how can you introduce that whole concept of 'process' when you can't know it until you have experienced it. What was a wonderful thing at Yeoman Park School was the way that people at every level got it – and that does take time.

Design proposals December 2008

