Background & Context

The Learning Grid is a centrally managed resource that complements other centralised student services: careers, academic enquiries, counselling service, work opportunities, which are located adjacent to the entrance to The Learning Grid and to a café/social area on the ground floor of the University House.

The Learning Grid was developed with active support and input from the Students’ Union, IT Services (including e-Lab and Audio Visual services), the Centre for Academic Practice, Warwick Skills Certificate staff and Careers. Other parties across the University e.g. CELTE (the Centre for English Language Teacher Education) and the International Office were also involved in discussions about the new facility prior to its opening. It was designed primarily to support group problem-solving activities, team working and presentation work, including an emphasis on facilitating the development and delivery of student presentations and supporting students in the use of digital multi-media for their assignments.

The Learning Grid is also home to the Reinvention Centre, a CETL and collaborative project based in the Sociology Department at Warwick and the School of the Built Environment at Oxford Brookes to promote new methods in teaching and learning with a focus on research-based learning.
The University of Warwick looks on the Learning Grid as a ‘physical expression of an ethos: the more power students are given to manage their own approaches to study, the more motivated and independent they will become as adult learners.’ It follows the principle that ‘many students require the stimulus of social interaction to construct meaning for themselves’. The facility is designed to ‘foster the development of independent adult learners’.

It is a ‘flexible social learning space designed to challenge and motivate students, encouraging them to explore new ways of responding to their courses and course assignments’.

The physical space was originally open plan offices.

The aim of the Learning Grid is ‘to provide students at the University of Warwick with a facility that actively supports the development of study, transferable and professional skills.’

The University House is a modern building close to the main campus which has been repurposed - it was formerly the corporate headquarters for the National Grid. A two-storey area within the building, The Learning Grid is adjacent to centralised student services e.g. careers and student support. This places student learning symbolically at the heart of the university’s administrative centre.

The Grid is open 24/7 to University of Warwick card-holders and is recording approximately 8-15,000 entrances a week in term time. In addition to the flexible and technology-rich space within the centre, the staff also offer drop-in workshops in generic and subject-based skills development, designed to be accessed at the point of need. The Learning Grid occupies a space of about 1350 square metres on two floors in University House, with capacity for approximately 300 students. It is managed by the Library and is open 24/7, closing only on Christmas Day.

All central student support services are co-located in the same administrative building, adjacent to the Learning Grid and this makes it easier for students to access services as and when they need them.

Funding Sources

HEFCE Project Capital monies

Cost of Project

£1 million
Technology

Paper notices are not used throughout the space, instead information is communicated through alternative means, especially plasma screens.

The Learning Grid is a wireless-enabled open space in which a range of information and multi-media technologies can be utilised, as required, for group learning. These include plasma screens, scanners, document visualisers, video cameras, video-editing facilities, some fixed PCs, SMART Boards, CleverBOARDs, OHPs, flip charts, magnetic screens, video and DVD players. These technologies can be used, subject to availability, alongside students' own mobile laptops/tablets. (Over 90% of Warwick students own their own computer). Printers and photocopiers are also available but networked to avoid cash payment at time of use.

Video conferencing is now available in one of The Grid's practice presentation rooms.

Adding Value

The flexible and varied arrangements of furniture, comprising adjustable computer tables, soft seating, movable screens, tables for individual and group working (all on castors for ease of re-arrangement), and some bookable rooms for presentations, allow the technology to be utilised in a variety of ways in support of a range of pedagogic aims.

Plasma information screens on both floors identify the student support staff on duty and give reminders of essential information, or advertise workshop provision. The Learning Grid in conjunction with the Re-Invention Centre also offers all current students and staff the opportunity to display their own original works of art on the Re-Invention centre's plasma wall which comprises four plasma screens.

Express terminals for email and catalogue checking are positioned near to the entrance to suggest this activity is separate from other uses of computers within the Grid.

Entrance to The Learning Grid is by a swipe card system, admitting University of Warwick student card holders only.

The university does not have a proprietary VLE but has Sitebuilder, a custom built suite of applications and learning resources accessible from The Learning Grid as well as other
University work areas.

Success Factors

What Makes The Space Successful?

The Learning Grid allows students to be creative, to experiment with new and different study methods, to apply a range of resources to support their learning experiences and to seek constructive advice and guidance on a range of related issues.

The range of individual and collaborative work areas and the availability of mobile screens, whiteboards and OHPs allow a large degree of flexibility in the space. Students are able to easily manipulate their environment in order to cater for their own individual learning needs.

The consumption of cold food and hot and cold drinks is allowed in the space as is the use of mobile phones - the main library on campus does not allow these activities. 'Raw entrance data indicates a 35% usage in comparison to the main library, which is ten times its size. During the vacation periods, entrances to the Learning Grid actually exceed that to the central facility'.

'We have created a culture of respect for users. Our student evaluation shows that they value being treated as competent individuals.'

Rachel Edwards, Learning Grid manager

'Given that there is so much emphasis on group work in the courses that I'm doing, it's been a necessity to have an area where we can conveniently meet and work together. If we were relying on other University resources, or our own accommodation as a meeting point, it just wouldn't have worked to the same extent. You can't do that in the Library, you cannot talk in the Library. Cafés don't tend to be the best place to do things - one reason is that you don't have that internet access, so if you need to check things online during a discussion, that's not a possibility. Again, if you're working in someone's accommodation, student residences are fairly small spaces, there's not a lot of room for groups. If people are off-campus, then it's a lot of to-ing and fro-ing to wherever. The University is a central place and the Learning Grid is a central place within the University.'

Student
What Is Innovative About The Design And The Use Of The Space?

The equipment is replicated on both floors and there are no zoned areas for particular activities - the ethos of the Grid is that students decide on the configuration of the space and the technology they require for their purpose, and can use it for as long as required. However, adjustable computer tables can be prioritised for wheelchair users.

These facilities are located within a study environment that can be reconfigured to provide a range of options, from separate bookable rooms for formal presentation practice to soft seating. There are also reference-use student text books available alongside web-based resources.

The Learning Grid is staffed by two permanent full time members of staff and 17 student advisors with a service model to ensure users' needs are met helpfully and purposefully. All staff members work across two sites, The Learning Grid and The BioMed Grid (a satellite facility for The Learning Grid that opened in February 2006). All student advisors are current students or recent graduates of the University.

An avoidance of barriers, such as booking systems, warning notices, fines, requests for specific behaviours, is key to this ethos. At times of peak demand, staff seek solutions rather than turning users away. The wireless-enabled café/social area just outside the Grid has been utilised as a stopgap on occasions until a solution can be found.

The varying uses of this space place a requirement on staff to be responsive, supportive and committed to their clients' needs and yet able to manage a high volume open access resource successfully. A zero negativity, customer-service ethos permeates the culture of the centre and has influenced students' behaviour and attitudes towards the equipment within the centre. The dual strategy of enabling students to achieve their learning goals through web-based and technological resources, and by means of personal interactions between advisors and users has ensured a responsive learning environment.

Where users' needs cannot be met by frontline staff, advisors are trained to refer enquiries and problems on to other expert services in the University.

The Learning Grid is designed to support collaborative and group working, so speech, mobile phone use and consumption of refreshments are permitted. Silent study areas are provided in the main library building.
User evaluation of the Grid and the services it offers takes place at regular intervals and by a variety of methods. Two key messages have emerged so far: 1) a culture of enquiry and respect for other users encourages effective and valid use by students, and 2) offering a student-centred, student-managed learning environment has had a beneficial effect on morale and motivation. Lecturers report that there has been considerable impact on performance in seminars and student presentations since the opening of the Learning Grid. The success of this innovative space for learning is informing future developments in library and learning centre provision, as part of a first phase of refurbishment in the main library, scheduled to take place in 2007.

Through becoming embedded as a library service and as a complementary broader support service, the Learning Grid is beginning to explore with individual academics the potential of integrating the use of the space directly into particular modules. Working in collaboration with the university's e-learning team, Centre for Academic Practice and the library's Academic Support Service, opportunities to support curriculum innovation are providing valuable insights of the benefits of drawing together library services and alternative teaching methods. This has led to a substantial impact on the student learning experience and allowed a new and emerging relationship between libraries and the curricula to develop.

**Lessons Learned**

Since The Learning Grid has opened, it has attracted a lot of interest from a number of other national and international institutions. Developments at the University of Warwick have begun to significantly shape the thinking of other university library departments that are beginning to pursue the development of similar facilities.

The responsive nature of the Learning Grid is allowing staff and students at the University of Warwick to continually develop their thinking about learning, service provision and the way courses can be delivered. This coming academic year, we look forward to the introduction of new technologies and new ideas; continued evaluation to allow us to shape future developments and better meet the learning needs of the individuals within our academic community. The possibilities that a resource like the Learning Grid is able to offer us are boundless, the question right now is 'where will it end?'.

As a result of the success of the Learning Grid Warwick opened a satellite facility in February 2006 known as the BioMed Grid which again continues the ethos of student-led inquiry into the fields of medical and biological sciences. Feedback as a result of the Learning Grid has fed into the remodelling of the larger main campus library due to start
in 2007. The Learning Grid is primed to become 'the university's incubator for a new generation of collaborative, research-based learning models and practices'.