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## **Undergraduate private study: in and out of new learning spaces**

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### **Background**

This study describes undergraduate study practices with particular reference to the design of an open design library space. A sampling strategy was designed for direct observations of individual study activity in this area. In addition, spot conversations were initiated with individual students on an arbitrary basis in order to determine the content of typical activity. Six focus groups of current users were convened. Finally, to create a broader context of study patterns, eight students kept general voice diaries relating to their study over a period of a week. This mixture of behavioural observation and self-reporting yielded a snapshot of undergraduate study and the appeal of new learning spaces to resource it. The highly social quality of the open learning area experience did not promote particularly intense or frequent episodes of collaborative working. However, diary records indicated that students more generally were not studying together in this way and that the new learning design was the only place where it did happen at all. Moreover, the general social atmosphere of free conversation did encourage other forms of less intense group study: in particular, a looser form of casual or serendipitous joint working. The opportunity to use available technologies for joint work was not widely taken (other than traditional PCs). The laissez-faire ambience of the learning space did not breakdown study in a way that is commonly feared. At any one moment, most students were privately studying and doing so with traditional materials. Many students acknowledged that the environment was a significant inspiration to study. However, the most widely felt limitations of this space concerned a territorial pattern of use and the exposure to distraction. Students were aware of their vulnerability to distraction but balanced this against the incentive of the prevailing social atmosphere to motivate study. Moreover, most students exercised a strategic use of space such that they would move in and out of library areas that afforded more or less intense and private concentration. Some suggestions for refining or extending design are offered.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do student study in new, open-format library spaces?
2. What is the nature of the collaborative learning that is supported by these spaces and their technologies?
3. How does access to such spaces fit with a general pattern of out-of-class study?
4. What implications for design can be drawn from ethological and ethnographic studies of this kind?

### **Methods**

Direct behavioural observation, situated, spot interviews, focus group, voice diary study records. The work maps onto a small number of studies that have described the design of new (collaborative) spaces designed to support private study

### **Frame**

Ethological analysis of direct observation. Phenomenographic analysis of self-reporting. Theory of auto-didactics and space design.

### **Research findings**

Spaces designed to afford more effective private and collaborative study have selective but useful impacts