Environment to Learn

Please read the following passages and consider how Clark College provides an environment that supports student learning today and how Clark College will provide an environment for students to learn in the future. On the last page of this document, you will find questions for you to consider. Prior to the second week of November, please discuss your thoughts with the group you were assigned on Opening Day.

The following passages are excerpted from various pages of a 14 page article entitled "Learning Environments: Where Space, Technology, and Culture Converge."[1] To access to the entire article, the link is footnoted below.

Page 3:

The learning space remains the heart of the educational enterprise, but the time has come for educators to widen the scope of inquiry about effectiveness in learning to include a fuller list of factors. The term learning environment encompasses learning resources and technology, means of teaching, modes of learning, and connections to societal and global contexts. The term also includes human behavioral and cultural dimensions, including the vital role of emotion in learning, and it requires us to examine and sometimes rethink the roles of teachers and students because the ways in which they make use of spaces and bring wider societal influences into play animates the educational enterprise. The focus on information technology in education is expanding from the enhancement of learning spaces to include factors beyond hardware, software, and the network. The learning environment is a composite of human practices and material systems, much as an ecology is the combination of living things and the physical environment.

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[1] Warger, Tom and Dobbin, Gregory. "Learning Environments: Where Space, Technology, Culture Converge." Educause; ELI Paper 1 (2009): n. pag. Web. 17 October 2013.
http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eli3021.pdf

Environment Defined

The term environment denotes the totality of the surroundings and conditions in which something or someone lives or functions. A discussion about learning environments starts with a physical space, a virtual equivalent, or at least a set of organizational principles that had their origins in a conventionally space-influenced model. Whether a classroom, an island in a virtual domain, or a chat room in a learning management system (LMS), this core place features connections to other places and resources. These might be other learning spaces, but they are also likely to be places outside the educational world. A class in finance might, for example, include a real-time connection to a stock-trading floor. Technology can also provide an interactive, immersive experience, joining language students with native speakers via a teleconference or sending them on a virtual walk through ancient Roman buildings.

A learning environment consists of a wide set of features that affect learning. The idea of a learning environment implies a setting where intentions and design cannot account for everything that happens; some elements escape control or are at least unintended. Environment, then, is a mix of the deliberate and the accidental, the conjunction of planned and unanticipated events. To some extent, traditional teaching in conventional classrooms could support this dynamic—students could be given assignments to take in directions that show mastery but also imagination and creativity. Now, however, with minimally mediated access to large amounts of information and with a substantially enhanced social dimension available to students, the set of directions students can take in their learning is far larger and growing. Some of this change is sanctioned by faculty; other parts of it reflect the environmental changes brought by technology and a tipping of control in favor of students regardless of faculty intentions.

Space becomes environment when it is stretched to include a broader sense of place, as well as the people who participate and the culture in which these elements are situated. The idea of environment invites a wider range of participants: administrators of various levels and functions, faculty, guest experts, librarians, IT staff, instructional designers, and learning theorists and researchers. The term implies a multiplicity of players, forces, and systems interacting. Environment is dynamic—changing in response to influences from outside or arising inside. It recognizes complexity in causes and effects.

Looking Ahead

What, then, does an effective learning environment look like? To be sure, there isn't a single answer to that question, no prescription for how the components of a learning environment should be assembled for maximum benefit. The variables are many, and combinations that

work well in one setting won't be ideal at other institutions, in different disciplines, or even in several sections of the same course taught by different faculty. Moreover, the fact that technologies and teaching methods will continue to evolve means that the job of creating effective learning environments is a journey, not a destination. What is clear is that we must begin to think in environmental terms about the factors that influence learning and strive to understand, test, measure, and evaluate how they work together as an interrelated system—an ecology of learning.

To be successful, this effort must represent a coordinated effort from all levels of an institution. The process of investigating and creating effective learning environments is one that depends on participation—and leadership—from faculty, instructional designers, technologists, students, senior institutional leaders, librarians, administration, and others around campus. In many ways, these groups of campus constituents frequently operate independent of one another, doing their jobs in the dreaded silo model. The discussion and work around learning environments is an excellent opportunity to refocus attention on the common goal and discover new ways to work together to attain it. To this end, the following recommendations can be important principles to bear in mind as the journey begins:

- *Think carefully about what you are trying to accomplish.* The construction of an effective learning environment requires thoughtfulness about what you are asking of—and offering to—students who participate in it.
- *Keep an eye on technology.* Information technology is in large part responsible for the reexamination of learning spaces that has led us to now consider learning environments. In many ways, it has been the proverbial game-changer, and technology developments will continue to pave the way for new opportunities to change and improve higher education.
- *Look beyond technology.* Factors including people, culture, pedagogy, and assessment can be as important as technology in thinking about what makes a successful learning environment. In certain situations, a highly effective learning environment might be devoid of anything digital or electronic.
- *Question everything, and listen to all ideas.* The opportunity to fundamentally rethink not just the space in which learning takes place but also the environment that supports education depends on looking at teaching and learning with new eyes. Apostates and experimenters must be encouraged to take risks and push traditional boundaries. A "sandbox" approach to instructional development can encourage emergent phenomena to flourish. The World Wide Web itself is a compelling example of how a non-specific platform can lead to revolutionary change.
- *Reflect and evaluate.* As new ideas are tested, measure the results, evaluate the effectiveness of different models, and demand that technologies and learning environment structures demonstrate their mettle. In the context of learning environments, accountability for the educational effectiveness of IT systems and resources will increase.

- *Implement structures that support faculty.* The role of faculty in learning environments is likely to be different from what it has traditionally been. Institutions must support a program of incentives, rewards, and training that will help faculty become players in a team-based approach to course delivery and skilled using new techniques and technologies. Institutions must also measure faculty engagement and productivity in ways that go beyond simple quantitative measures such as publication credits and student evaluations.
- *Look at the big picture.* The concept of learning environments implies that the many people involved understand how their roles and those of others work together. The IT profession, for example, needs to improve its awareness of curricular requirements and the related cultural changes happening in the learning environment, particularly with regard to the changing roles of faculty and students.
- *IT needs to acquire competencies in pedagogy.* Faculty should see IT staff as partners in the educational enterprise, not simply service technicians. IT should have a cadre of staff, largely academic in background, who can coach, encourage, and support faculty as they develop their pedagogy in new directions. These staff will need to work collaboratively with librarians, teaching and learning centers, and technical specialists.
- *Think about culture.* Work to understand both the culture that exists on campus today and the kind of learning culture your institution might want to cultivate. Creating effective learning environments will depend on implementing structures and activities appropriate to the way students and faculty view learning.

The exploration of the many factors that influence learning and the development of learning environments that take advantage of the knowledge that results from that exploration offer an opportunity to bring a new understanding to the very basis of education. It is an inclusive process that strives to make more efficient and more effective use of learning technologies, practices, and activities. The traditional classroom isn't likely to disappear but will be part of learning environments that do and far exceed what we've known before.

Please take notes on this page and bring it with you to your group meeting.

1. *How does Clark College currently create an environment to support student learning?*

2. *How will Clark College create the best environment to support learning by year 2020?*

3. *What are the key components that must be in place to ensure Clark provides the optimal environment for students to learn?*