

Session 3

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT CHALLENGE

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Can *where* you learn effect *how* you learn?

Can a better environment promote better learning?

The common consensus is **yes** and at the University of Melbourne a space has been dedicated to the exploration of these themes. The brain-child of Associate Professor Peter Jamieson, the 'Learning Environments Spatial Lab' (LESL) is:

part 'circus space' – supporting multiple, parallel activities;

part 'theatrical set' – being adaptable and the transparent in its operation ;

part 'design laboratory' - enabling ideas to be transformed into three dimensional form;

part 'domestic garage' – reflecting the wide demands placed on it and the overall sense of it being a durable work space.

LESL is intended to make problematic a host of matters relating to the design of classrooms, in order to challenge users of the space in regard to their own thinking about what a classroom 'can' be.

Therefore, LESL makes problematic issues such as the use of 'colour', 'materials', 'classroom orientation', 'collaborative learning group size', 'collaborative table shape and height', 'integration of technology', 'division of space in shared settings' and 'provision of working surfaces for students'. It is not about presenting users with an 'answer' to these issues which we are advocating they duplicate; rather it is a matter of raising these issues in a setting where they can experience them directly.

A visitor to the LESL might encounter a range of simultaneous activity – separated partially or in full by dividing curtain and/or folding panels – including a small group discussion around a large kitchen table; a mock portion of a classroom set-up to model the use of a new audio-visual device for small group learning; and a design team creating cardboard templates of proposed tables for small-group learning. On another occasion, the visitor might find the entire floor space is laid out as a possible configuration for collaborative, team-teaching in a distinct disciplinary field (e.g. Physics) for a class of 42 students. The use of the LESL in this way can be 'programmed' over an intensive period to replicate real-life, timetabled classes for trainee teachers. Alternatively, the visitor might find part of the LESL given over to the display of various, competing furniture types at one end of the facility, whilst at the other end a commercial supplier of information technology is demonstrating the company's latest presentational devices for classrooms.

In an old gymnasium within the heart of a 1930's heritage listed building at the University of Melbourne, Architectus have created a truly flexible and adaptable space where educators, designers, facility managers, clients, end users and students can explore, create and test their visions of learning environments. Within the University's mandate to provide compliant, cost effective and environmentally sustainable design, a very unique space has been created.

How do you design flexibility?

How do you create an inspiring space?

What do you do when half your budget is swallowed by Audio Visual and IT?

What is the benefit of prototyping?

How can you leave a trace of the former room's function in the new design?

What is the perfect table shape?

The case study of the development of the Learning Environments Spatial Lab answers these questions and shows how a true collaboration between client and architect can achieve remarkable results.

Presenters Biography

As a Director of Architectus, **Ruth Wilson** is generally involved in the design and delivery of large, complex and technically challenging projects. Her work in the Tertiary field includes the Monash Centre for Electron Microscopy, The Monash Victorian College of Pharmacy and the Australian Synchrotron.

The University of Melbourne's Learning Environments Spatial Laboratory is a small project in comparison but no less complex. Ruth used her collaborative approach to design and problem solving, mentoring graduate architect Sophie Nicholaou as project leader and offering the University continual consultation and partnership. The project utilised all the skills Ruth has acquired over her 20 years of practice- from value management practices on multi-million dollar projects to joinery detailing she learnt whilst working for a shop fitting company in Germany in the 1990's.

Architectus have delivered exemplary projects in all education sectors and have a special interest in learning environments, Ruth is committed to understanding and considering the connections between the education facility design and the learning outcomes of the students and producing inspirational environments that are conducive to the learning experience.