

# Learning Spaces



This Briefing Paper highlights some key features of CILASS investment in technology-rich learning spaces. CILASS has invested £1.83M of its original capital award in creating new spaces for learning, teaching and staff development within the Information Commons, the University's new centre for learning resources which opened in April 2007. A further £350K of capital funding awarded in January 2006 led to the creation of a 'collaboratory' at Bartolomé House.

## What is a 'collaboratory'?

The CILASS spaces have been designed specifically to support collaborative, student-led inquiry in arts and social sciences disciplines. They also provide excellent facilities for staff development activity relating to inquiry-based learning (IBL). Three large inquiry collaboratories – classrooms conceived as research environments – offer access to a wide variety of technologies as an integral part of the learning and teaching experience. Other features include 'soft' spaces, breakout areas and small-group rooms for informal use by students.

## Equipment in the collaboratories

The equipment inside the collaboratories is designed to be as

flexible as possible in order to allow the technology-rich space and the student learning experience to be reconfigured easily to suit different needs.

- **Huddle boards and copy cams**  
Huddle boards are lightweight whiteboards that can be used by groups to record discussions, plan activities and map out knowledge. Huddle boards can then be placed underneath a copy cam which will take a digital picture of the information, which can then be downloaded from a webpage to one of the CILASS laptops (or any PC) to create a permanent record.
- **Walltalker 'Tektura' write-on walls**  
One of the collaboratories in the Information Commons has recently been equipped with a large section of write-on wallpaper to allow students to work collaboratively on a large canvas and visually represent their individual and collective ideas and discussions.
- **Symposium**  
Each collaboratory is equipped with a symposium, an interactive workstation which allows lecturers or students to reconfigure the technology inside the collaboratory creatively, for example to allow the whole class to see the work of one individual group of students.
- **Wireless laptops/ networked desktops**  
Each of the collaboratories contains a number of wireless laptops and/or networked PCs to facilitate small group and individual working, and particularly to allow students to conduct and share research carried out during contact time.



- **Plasma stations**  
The CILASS plasma station provides a control point for the 5 plasma screens in the Bartolomé House collaboratory. Screens can display content from any of the laptops connected to the system, multimedia such as DVDs, and interactive material created by the symposium.
- **Video streaming system**  
The CILASS spaces in Bartolomé House and the Information Commons have facilities for real time recording of teaching and learning sessions.
- **Other equipment**  
DVD players; square flexible tables; Sony Vaio laptops; Toshiba tablet PCs; large screen PCs (24"); Access Grid Node videoconferencing facilities; Personal Access Grid capabilities; a range of camcorders; RO9 audio recorders.

## Impact of the collaboratories

The collaboratories have been met with great enthusiasm by users. The design of the spaces is felt to be particularly successful; this has impacted positively on institutional capacity building and internal and external dissemination of innovation. Thirteen academic departments made use of the Bartolomé House space in the academic year 2006/2007, while numerous CILASS, University of Sheffield and external events have been hosted there. Increasing demand for teaching has continued over the current academic session, with nineteen academic departments and several University central service departments making use of CILASS spaces. The CILASS spaces in the Information Commons have proved extremely popular with students for autonomous, informal learning and staff development and related activity since their opening in April 2007.

CILASS received national recognition for the design of technology-rich learning spaces: the inquiry collaboratory in Bartolomé House was selected by HEFCE-JISC as a good practice case study (see web address below).

**Students** have reported enhancement of their learning experience; the technology quickly becomes a transparent feature that effectively facilitates a variety of modes of inquiry, interaction and presentation.

**“CILASS rules! What an environment!”**

**“CILASS room fantastic - technology here was really great, made it far more interesting than other seminars.”**

**“We were so lucky to use the CILASS technology. Learning has finally come into the 21st century. The new technology has opened my eyes to exciting new ways to examine literary texts.”**

**Staff** perceive that the space helps to promote student responsibility for their role in the learning process and that students are very rapidly able to make the environment their own, varying layout and using different facilities according to need. The collaboratories have stimulated new ways of thinking about relationships between teacher and student and between student peers. The new facilities have made it easier to carry out existing types of learning activity and have stimulated further experimentation and thinking about designing and facilitating IBL.

**“I think it’s a fantastic space and it’s very well set up, with a lot of flexibility.”**

**“The experience has boosted my confidence and I’m very pleased that I was brave enough to take on the challenge of learning how to use all this new equipment and experimenting in new teaching methods. It’s been a learning process for both me and the students!”**

**“It has been useful learning more about how to use the technology. I’m able to be more creative when I don’t have to worry so much about physical constraints.”**

**“It has enabled me to do better things I was doing in less suitable accommodation.”**

**“I think this experience has been memorable. It has been both stressful [...] and time-consuming, sometimes frustrating [...] but it’s certainly encouraged the students to take on a hands-on, frontline role in the learning process and made me take a step back.”**

**“I wish facilities like the Collaboratory were more widely available throughout the University.”**

## The Future

The ideas that underpin the design of CILASS spaces and their practical design features have influenced other initiatives, such as the wider Information Commons and a number of academic departments.

User feedback has highlighted the importance of developing a reliable, service-oriented approach to supporting the use of CILASS spaces, comparable to that of central University of Sheffield services. CILASS provides pedagogical support for using new technology through its Learning Development and Research Associates. However, the enhanced technological specification and the creation of spaces in two locations have increased the level and complexity of technical support requirements beyond what was originally anticipated. In addition, CILASS has pioneered central provision and support of laptops in teaching. These factors have presented a challenge, including the need for provision of more extensive training/development activities and support tailored to specific departments and stakeholder groups. This is an important area for further development of our support activity, in order to ensure that the technology is being used to its full potential.

*This Briefing Paper draws on the CILASS Interim Evaluation Report to HEFCE, July 2007, highlighting achievements and themes arising out of the CETL’s activity.*

*See [www.shef.ac.uk/cilass](http://www.shef.ac.uk/cilass) for the full Interim Evaluation Report.*

*See [www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning\\_innovation/eli\\_learningspaces\\_casestudies.aspx](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning_innovation/eli_learningspaces_casestudies.aspx) for HEFCE-JISC good practice video.*

*CILASS (Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences) is a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), awarded to the University of Sheffield by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in April 2005.*



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