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What did the Disruptive Media Learning Lab ever do for us?

Picture this. The Lanchester Library, Coventry University, 2014. The Disruptive Media Learning Lab (DMLL) opens on the top floor amongst a flurry of raised eyebrows and unanswered questions. 'What is it?', 'Why is it in the Library?' and 'Who designed the wooden hill?' Our Academic Liaison Librarian team were asked to move in there alongside a DMLL team comprising educational researchers and principal project leads, each specializing in a flavour of teaching practice such as open, flipped and gamification. A learning technologist, project and admin staff and student activators add to the mix. Still not sure what that would mean for a library? Neither were we. This article will take you through the reasons behind this alien landing, past the hill and the grass and onto the plains of what the DMLL ever did for the Library and our students.

In the beginning

The Disruptive Media Learning Lab (DMLL) was born of innovative or 'disruptive' changes to both curriculum and teaching practice emerging from the Photography department at Coventry University. Feeding on creative pedagogies, the changes centred on:

- using spaces in different ways and using different spaces, the objective being to stimulate students to think outside the traditional processes engendered by traditional lecture or seminar-style spaces

- open and collaborative practices to break subject and institutional silos, for example opening up a photography course online to allow students, professional practitioners and any interested members of the public to share and collaborate[1]

- digital tools to underpin and enable learning (but, crucially, not to dominate it).

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The success of this disruptive practice fed into the desire to stimulate and push change across the wider curriculum. Excellent teaching can become stale quite quickly if not challenged. In order to drive that change all staff needed to be supported to:

- collaborate – particularly across disciplines and with students as co-creators

- make changes through exposure to innovative practice, supported by solid examples of how it could be done

- make changes in a bounded way through projects which would allow for the scaling up of successful initiatives

- be allowed to fail in a neutral space and learn from mistakes.

'Excellent teaching can become stale quite quickly if not challenged'

The first and last points answer the question 'Why is it in the Library?' Well, there was probably a certain amount of pragmatism involved – we had withdrawn a lot of print journals in favour of electronic, so there was space. Crucially though, the Library is a neutral space open to and used by everyone: staff, students and visitors; it is not 'owned' by one faculty. It has a high footfall, it is central and we already had a team of Academic Liaison Librarians (ALT) who taught in every faculty to help spread the word. That makes it the perfect space for people to experiment and, if needs be, fail, without the pressure of peers and managers.

So how did those ambitions translate into reality?

Occupying the whole top floor of the Library (see photos), the DMLL provides a physical space made up of:

- a glass-fronted collaborative staff area based on hot-desking, where the DMLL team and ALT are based but any academic is welcome to come and drop in

- collaborative spaces – we have three project rooms, circles, curves and wood, all with different-textured floors and walls – where staff can work with students and which students can use when they are not booked out for a project

- configurable teaching spaces with everything on wheels – not everything has to be high tech!

- configurable student spaces and different student spaces (and yes, we do have a wooden hill and a grassed amphitheatre).

> 'yes, we do have a wooden hill and a grassed amphitheatre'
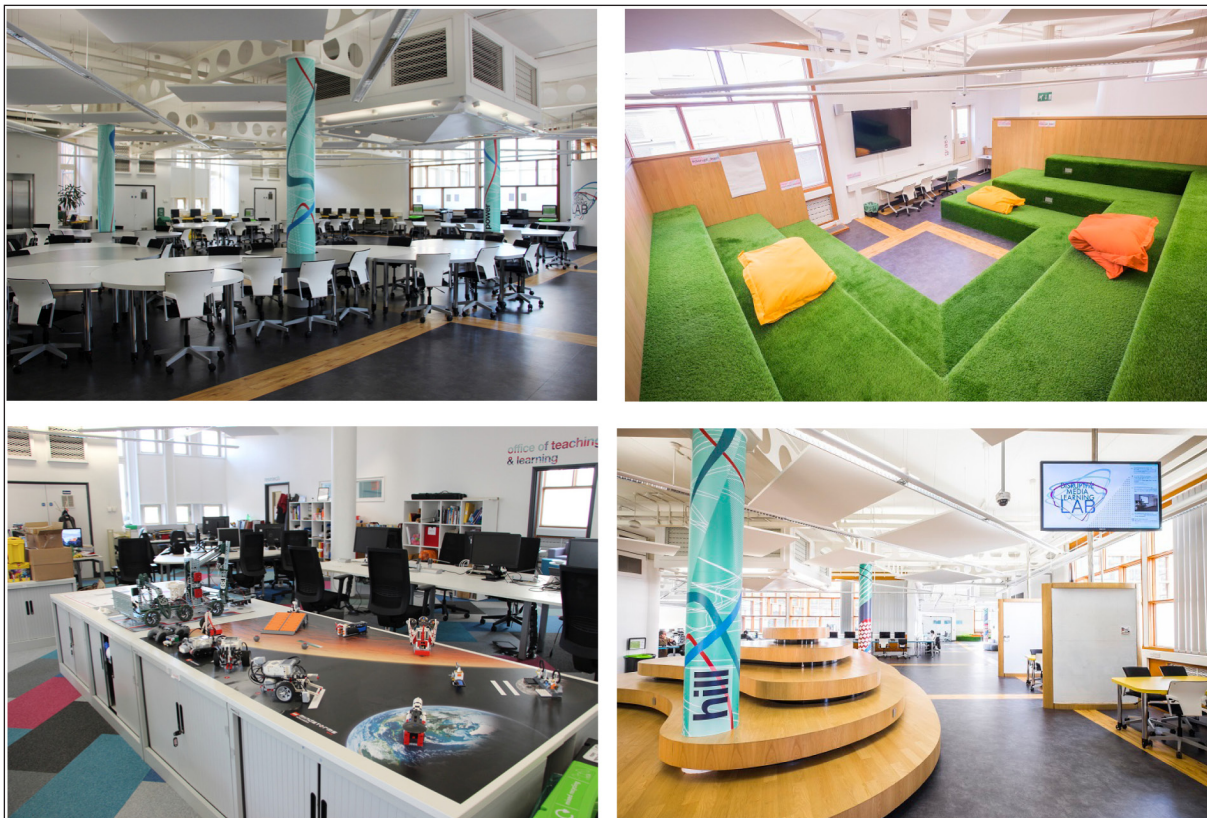
The DMLL – clockwise from top left: the open café, the grass, the hill and the staff office

This is accompanied by the use of transformative technology to underpin pedagogies, an emphasis on gamification and open learning, and also recognition of the need to build digital confidence in both staff and students. Latterly, the Office of Teaching and Learning, our quality assurance unit, has joined the DMLL.

The DMLL works on a funded project basis. Internal projects were initially bid for through a Dragons' Den-style pitch[2] and later through an application form. Successful candidates are then supported through their bid project by DMLL staff.

How does the Library fit into that?

There are really three key areas where the DMLL has directly impacted on Library practice:

- collaborative projects

- working with students

- disrupting our own teaching practices.

Collaborative projects

The DMLL has brought expertise and resources to our doorstep that enable us to get involved in bigger projects than we might have done otherwise.

PALS (Pre-Arrival Library Support) Project

The PALS project[3] was a successful bid by two of our Liaison Librarians who already took special responsibility for supporting international students. A long way from home, friends and family, dealing with a different language and culture shock, international students principally make up the queues at the service points in the first few weeks and months of term. The vast majority are also postgraduate, so not only are they expected to hit the ground running academically, but there are often big assumptions made about their prior knowledge and skills. It was very apparent to us that international students are at an immediate disadvantage in relation to any peer who has already used a UK higher education (HE) library.

Our Librarians worked with DMLL researchers to run a series of focus groups to determine what exactly students found difficult about using the Library, how we operated differently from their prior experience and how we could help them. There was a big mismatch in expectations around students' ability and understanding of self-service (from helping yourself to a book on the shelf to checking it out), and in struggling to understand that our book sequence runs from left to right, top to bottom per bay. These may seem like minor things but we had simply not thought about just how hard this latter concept was for some students, particularly those whose first language worked right to left.

'There was a big mismatch in expectations around students' ability and understanding'

Working with a member of our own systems team with strong design skills and the DMLL Learning Technologist, the result was an online package which we push out to international students prior to arrival via our Recruitment and Admissions Office. By the beginning of December 2015 the site had received 25,712 hits, 9,803 page views and an average of 76 pages viewed each day.[4] We have recently moved it from our WordPress site to the LibGuide platform. The project won an internal award for Student Support Initiative of the Year in 2016 and more recently was the platform upon which we won Outstanding Library Team of the Year at the Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Awards, known as THELMA[5] (see photo).

Phil Jones, Academic Liaison Manager, Coventry University, receives the THELMA

Lanchester Interactive Archive

This initiative brought together the skilled bid writing of the DMLL and the information management skills of the Library. The result was a substantial Heritage Lottery award to digitize the papers of Sir Frederick Lanchester, after whom the original Lanchester Polytechnic and now the Library are named. Fred was an engineer and polymath best known for his founding of the Lanchester car company. His inventions and works range from advances in colour photography and aerodynamic theories to military strategies still used in business teaching today. His digitized papers consist of correspondence, blueprints, notebooks, sketchbooks and photographs.[6]

As well as creating a digitized collection for researchers, the bid has allowed us to create a physical exhibition space within the Library, which was recently opened by members of the Lanchester family.

The Lanchester Interactive Archive exhibition space, showing a 1933 Lanchester and an augmented reality tool

Employing two outreach workers and involving volunteers, the aim of the project is to encourage science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) take-up in schools. This feeds directly into the engineering and design traditions of both the University and the city of Coventry. In particular the project aims to attract more females into science and technology subjects prior to making their age 16+ exam choices.

We are also using the archive to bring our student engineers into the space. We have a Masters dissertation student working on Fred's 1897 never-built plane sketches, to test if his design ideas would work in reality. We hope also to link into other courses such as history and industrial design.

'the project aims to attract more females into science and technology'

Underpinning the physical space and digitized archive is a suite of augmented reality objects and digital games that are central to bringing the concepts and ideas to life. Designed to feed into the design and technology strand at key stage 3 of the national curriculum,[7] these are both available in the physical space and online as a pack that teachers anywhere can use with classes.[8] You can also try them at home.

The project has also enabled us to employ an archivist for the first time, which will also benefit our other, smaller archives. We have recently had an exciting donation of material around the Victorian actress Ellen Terry, which we hope we can begin to exploit in conjunction with our performing arts courses.

Working with students

One of the key aspects of the lab is both cross-disciplinary working and bringing students in as partners and co-creators. For example, we have used student activators (both in-course or very recent graduates) to help us put together promotional materials and videos, using the skills of students to enhance our work and their practice. Another example is our Language Librarian, who worked with the student magazine *Coventry Words* to bring student poetry to the DMLL walls.

A project-based example is the Digital Leaders initiative conceived by two ALT members and funded by the DMLL. Working in collaboration with DMLL staff and the Office of Teaching and Learning, the project built on reported outcomes of the Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy (SADL) project at London School of Economics (LSE).[9] Students were invited to attend a series of workshops and then apply to become a digital leader via video submission. There were five workshops that covered different aspects of digital literacy including social networking, digital footprint, ethics, security and privacy. The key focus was to concentrate on ensuring students felt equipped to pass on their skills to their peers. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Digital Leaders poster

Each Digital Leader developed their own digital initiative or mini-project and delivered this in some format to their peers and other members of the University. The final 'passing it on' workshop was a brainstorming session to come up with ideas for mini-projects and the ways in which we could get the information that the students had learned and discussed out into the world.

Examples of digital leader projects included:

- webcam stickers and promotion around online privacy

- using social media to highlight your work and create a digital footprint you want people to see

- YouTube video series promoting online security, particularly the use of strong passwords

- posters and accompanying website highlighting the importance of keeping your online content private – particularly relevant to nursing students and their use of social media.

'participants can earn a digital badge to evidence their skills development to future employers'

This programme is now being tied into the DMLL open badges project, so that participants can earn a digital badge to evidence their skills development to future employers.[10]

Disrupting our own teaching practice

The ALT team already undertook thousands of hours of teaching every year. However, exposure to new ideas right on our doorstep makes it easier to move away from the status quo. DMLL staff organize a number of internal conferences each year as well as regular sessions on new practice and technologies. Library staff can dip in and out of these with ease and have help on hand to incorporate them straight into teaching practice. For example, our Engineering Librarian has applied the Lego serious play project to teach students about referencing and plagiarism.[11]

This exposure to developing teaching practice and collaboration has had a significant impact on our level 2 Add+Vantage module. Add+Vantage modules are credit bearing and designed to enhance a student's employability. Most students must take one each year at Coventry University. We have run an Information Literacy module for a number of years now, concentrating on information seeking and evaluation, especially in the workplace. This was previously delivered by one member of ALT, assessed by essay and consisted of a relatively traditional offering of hands-on workshops.

In light of the changes to teaching practice, the whole ALT came together to take on a team teaching approach to this module and radically overhaul the content and pedagogies employed. So, by contrast, in 2017 the module was:

- delivered by the whole team in differing pairs to a redefined set of learning outcomes based around digital as well as information skills

- run in a variety of DMLL and library spaces

- delivered using a range of teaching methods and technologies and included a field trip

- assessed by portfolio with a range of tasks.

'To see the students so engaged with our teaching is enormously satisfying'

Topics and activities included understanding your digital footprint, problem-based learning scenarios, creating a journalism code of ethics, team debating, understanding freedom of information, tools for collaboration and getting the class to make something 'go viral'. The first module evaluation scores are in and the module scored 100% satisfaction on 17 of the 20 questions. To see the students so engaged with our teaching is enormously satisfying.

Lessons learnt

It would be disingenuous to imply that everything about working in the DMLL has been an unprecedented success. There are things about the DMLL that Library staff do find difficult. It can be noisy and hard to concentrate as there is a lot going on. Staff were not that happy about a hot-desking approach with all-mobile tech. We also learned that human beings can be very attached to a set of drawers. Our students love the grass; but the hill not so much. Academics have really engaged with the pedagogy coming out of the Lab but tend not to work in there outside of specific activities or sessions. The Academic Liaison Librarians were asked to post a positive and negative about the DMLL on an online collaboration tool, Padlet.[12] Here (see Table 1) are a few of their comments that generally reflect the overall feedback.

'human beings can be very attached to a set of drawers'

Positive	Negative
A nice buzz in the office and plenty of opportunities to talk about interesting new developments in pedagogy like flipped learning, gamification, etc. Also the opportunity to propose and pursue projects slightly outside of the normal library remit (e.g. Digital Leaders) which can bring real benefits in terms of collaborating with other teams and innovating.	The problems that come with an open office, i.e. distractions and occasional disagreements over the use of space.
Has meant that I have had the opportunity to work on a very exciting project, which would not have been as successful without DMLL funding and input. I have definitely become more open to using different teaching spaces. I also find a lot of what the DMLL does very inspiring, and it has made me reflect on my own teaching and try and use more innovative practices.	Open plan office! (This is less of a problem with more flexible working, and management being happy with us working in other spaces.) I think because everything on this floor is labelled 'DMLL' it is easy for people to not know that we are based up here.
Because librarians work across all faculties we can spot where DMLL projects might assist with faculty aims and suggest link-ups. Good for the uni and for the profile of librarians as generally useful folk to have around!	The title and location of the DMLL office is a barrier to students finding me. My productivity is a bit lower because of having to set up equipment every day, using Wi-Fi, remote desktop and not having 'traditional' storage facilities for my pens/teaching materials.

Table 1. Typical examples of feedback from Academic Liaison Librarians on the DMLL

As well as exposure to new ideas impacting on our teaching, the buzz of the DMLL has encouraged us to be generally more creative and enjoy what we do more. We have run several exhibitions in the DMLL exhibition space including banned books (the ultimate in disruption), the evolution of the Lanchester Library and most recently Technocultures – A History of Computer Gaming (see photo). Our Media Librarian collaborated with the DMLL and the National Videogame Arcade, borrowing some exhibition pieces to tie in with the gaming strand of the DMLL.

'the buzz of the DMLL has encouraged us to be generally more creative'

Technocultures in the DMLL exhibition space

We also turned the banned books and gaming exhibitions into topics for our all-staff training hours, giving us older staff the chance to fondly remember our Sinclair ZX Spectrums and Commodore 64s.

The future

There is no doubt that the DMLL has pushed us into places, sometimes uncomfortable, that we would never have visited otherwise. We are keen for the ALT in particular to build on the momentum and continue to find new ways of working. More recently we have set up an Information Navigator open badge[13] through the DMLL that is available to any Coventry student. We will be collaborating with DMLL staff to deliver our festival-style induction this year, including a game creation workshop to help students puzzle their way through the challenges and pitfalls of university life. Other conversations are ongoing around augmented reality, a virtual reality dome and a library roadshow with local radio.

We will shortly be expanding the team as we have recognized that engaging innovative teaching requires resource, and staff will not innovate if they do not feel they have the time or support to do it. We need to continue to work on supporting less digitally confident team members with their own skills, something that the collaborative working of the Add+Vantage module has allowed us to do.

We also need to ensure that we continue to be seen alongside academic colleagues as partners, and be recognized for our skills. Through the whole journey our Librarians have very much kept their own identity rather than becoming DMLL staff, and instead have used what is on offer to best advantage. We feel that recognition of our own distinct professional skills remains important. Love or loathe the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), now really is a fantastic opportunity to frame what libraries bring to teaching excellence within our institutions. Clearly, libraries can feed into many of the assessment criteria, but in particular those around learning environment, including resources, scholarship research and professional practice. Personalized learning, and also criteria under student outcomes and learning gain, i.e. further study, employability and transferable skills, are also pertinent.[14] Moving forward, the global post-Brexit agenda and the changes in the HE market mean that we also need to find a way of ensuring that we translate those teaching standards currently grounded in physical collaboration into meaningful communities of learning solely in the digital sphere. That remains a very hard thing to achieve.

> 'Pushing teaching excellence to its limit needs constant innovation'

The DMLL had a three-year lifespan which, as I write, is coming to a close. We know it will continue but we are still waiting to see how. Pushing teaching excellence to its limit needs constant innovation; the DMLL has afforded us the opportunity to get involved in that journey and continues to do so. The danger will be allowing it to become a comfortable norm. So we look forward to disrupting the disruption.

> 'we look forward to disrupting the disruption'

Abbreviations and Acronyms
A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insight*s articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: **http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa**

Competing interests
The author has declared no competing interests.

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