What is it?

The University of Warwick’s Learning Grid is a flexible social learning space designed to challenge and motivate students, encouraging them to explore new ways of responding to their courses and course assignments. Wireless-enabled and open 24 x 7, the Grid boasts a range of information and multimedia technologies to facilitate student-led discussions, group problem solving, presentation development, and digital multimedia production. Bringing their mobile laptops or tablets (more than 90 percent of Warwick’s students own computers), Grid users take advantage of the facility’s broad range of technologies: plasma screens, scanners, document visualizers, video cameras, video-editing facilities, some fixed PCs, SMART boards, CleverBoards, overhead projectors, flip charts, magnetic screens, and video and DVD players, along with networked printers and photocopiers. Working to develop the kinds of transferable, professional skills they will need to succeed in the contemporary workplace, as many as 300 Warwick students can be found inside the 1,350 square-meter, two-story facility. Open and sweeping in its design, the space is large enough to house a 10,000-book reference collection alongside its state-of-the-art collaborative technologies.

The university regards its Learning Grid as a physical expression of an ethos: the more power students are given to manage their own approaches to study, the more motivated and independent they will become as adult learners. Proceeding along the principle that many students require the stimulus of social interaction to construct meaning for themselves, the Learning Grid breaks with the restrictions associated with the traditional library experience: food, drink, and mobile phone use are permitted, while booking systems, warning notices, fines, and requests for specific behaviors are nowhere in sight. Adjustable computer tables, soft seating, movable screens, and tables for individual and group work (all on castors for easy reconfiguration) make it simple for students to configure the work areas as they see fit. For students who need a separate space in which to prepare and rehearse class presentations, specially equipped rooms can be booked for two-hour intervals. Additionally, students can take advantage of drop-in workshops—in generic and subject-based skills—that are available to them “at the point of need.”

Everything about the Learning Grid facility is designed to foster the development of independent adult learners at Warwick. Tellingly, from the moment the Grid opened its doors in September 2004, its concept of a social learning space for exploration proved enormously popular with students. During the school term, the Learning Grid regularly records 8,000–15,000 entrances per week. Over vacation periods, entrances to the Grid actually exceed entrances to the main library, which is 10 times larger than the Grid. In February 2006, a satellite facility known as the BioMed Grid was opened to carry the Learning Grid’s ethos of student-led inquiry into the medical and biological sciences. At present, the key messages emerging from user evaluations of the Learning Grid space are having a significant impact on the planned remodelling of the much larger main campus library, scheduled to begin in 2007. Using a variety of evaluative methods, Library Services has confirmed the pedagogical value of adhering to a student-centered ethos that gives learners greater control over their environment and learning activities. Assessments reveal three key findings:

- Providing a culture of inquiry and respect for other users does encourage effective and valid use by students;
- Offering a student-managed learning environment has had a beneficial effect on morale and motivation; and, most significantly,
- Faculty members report that the Learning Grid is having a considerable impact on student classroom performance.

Now that the Learning Grid is home to Warwick’s Re-Invention Centre for Undergraduate Research, it is primed to become the university’s incubator for a new generation of collaborative, research-based learning models and practices.

What problem does it solve?

With 16,000 students, 30 academic departments, and 50 research institutes located on about 584 acres of English countryside, the University of Warwick questioned whether its current facilities adequately fostered development of the professional skills its graduates would need to compete in today’s technology-rich and team-oriented workplace. Research suggests that 21st-century skills are developed most effectively using curricular innovations that facilitate learner independence, group-based problem-solving activities, and personal development planning. It was determined that the range of resources offered by the main library did not support the ability to work collaboratively or to acquire transferable skills in a flexible, technologically rich, and responsive environment. The opportunity to refurbish an existing administration building at the heart of campus led to a frank re-envisioning of learning support for Warwick’s increasingly diverse and international student population.
How did they do it?

University of Warwick’s Library Services worked closely with a London architecture firm, MacCormac Jamieson Prichard, to refurbish University House, an existing building that was partly transformed into an innovative center for independent learning at a cost of £1 million, or roughly $1.9 million. Simple screens and movable furniture are used to help students demark special spaces for private study or collaborative activities. In a practice that is gaining momentum within higher education, the university’s library chose to move beyond the traditional computer lab, with its row upon row of forward-facing terminals, to create a livelier environment for learning, filled with curves, colors, and comforting textures. Bringing a contemporary note of transparency and lightness to the existing building, the architects added a steel staircase linking the Learning Grid’s two floors. A vibrant, multicolored electric tower by artist David Batchelor has been installed in the building’s atrium.

In keeping with its student-led character, the Learning Grid is staffed primarily with student advisors who are trained as learning facilitators. In place of a central help desk, these student advisors, wearing distinctive blue T-shirts, roam the two-story space, providing a friendly first point of contact, answering resource-related and technical queries and developing the literacy skills of their student peers. These advisors also serve a triage function, directing students to professional staff members able to provide advice and guidance on a wider range of issues that impact learner success. This triage function is supported by the university’s decision to group all student support services—from academic counseling and financial aid to work study and career guidance—in one convenient location. By clustering student administration services around the hub of the Learning Grid, the physical setting places the student at the heart of the university enterprise and reinforces the university’s new, holistic approach to student success.

Why is it noteworthy?

- **Collaborative, social learning space**: The Learning Grid uses social interaction as a stimulus to inquiry-based learning activities, which are fully supported by a blend of traditional and technological resources.

- **Student-managed learning environment**: Providing a space that students can configure to meet their needs, while staffing that space with student advisors trained to support a culture of inquiry, has had a positive impact on student morale, motivation, and classroom performance.

- **Holistic approach to learning support**: The colocation of all central student support services in the same administrative building, adjacent to the Learning Grid, makes it easy for students to access the guidance they need, when they need it. In consolidating student services, Warwick recognized that the academic, informational, and technological skills students must develop to succeed as professionals are interrelated and cannot be taught in isolation from one another.

To learn more

Visit the Learning Grid Web Site at http://go.warwick.ac.uk/grid/, or contact the Learning Grid Manager, Rachel Edwards, at Rachel.M.Edwards@warwick.ac.uk.

To share your innovation

If your institution has a practice that you believe would be of interest to the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, please share it with us. To submit your innovation for review, please use the ELI Innovations Contribution Form on our Community Exchange page <http://www.educause.edu/ELICommunityExchange/6797>. A panel will review your submission and make a recommendation to the ELI staff.

About the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative

The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) is a community of higher education institutions and organizations committed to advancing learning through IT innovation. To achieve this mission, ELI focuses on learners, learning principles and practices, and learning technologies. We believe that using IT to improve learning requires a solid understanding of learners and how they learn. It also requires effective practices enabled by learning technologies. We encourage institutions to use this report to broaden awareness and improve effective teaching and learning practice.