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The Pod Room – A Group Learning Space

What it is?

Bond University has recently completed construction of an engaging formal teaching space, known as the Pod Room, named as a result of its pod, or kidney-shaped, group work desks. The room has been designed to facilitate interactivity, teamwork, and sociability amongst students. Our concept of this pod space is based on an innovative design that has been successfully trialled at the University of Melbourne and the University of Queensland. Essentially a pod is an area consisting of a large group table, chairs, and computer system, in which a small group of students can work. Each pod naturally allows a team of students to work cooperatively on solving

a problem. A classroom typically has four or five pods. The teacher controls the display system of all pods via a switching system, allowing students in all the pods to see either the same view (either from the teacher's station or another pod), or their own view.

Figure 1 shows the plan of the pod room, while Figures 2 to 5 shows photos of the space from various angles.

Why is it?

The opportunities for students to work together and collectively solve problems are important

features of assessment practice at the University. Until now, we have not had a formal teaching space in which group-oriented activities could easily occur. If group work was required in class time, often classroom furniture would need to be moved to accommodate, and computer access was via the lectern computer. For many teachers, this has been an understandably unsatisfactory arrangement. The Pod Room has been specifically designed to easily facilitate these activities.

What happens here?

Essentially this room is designed to accommodate blended learning activities, where information and communications technology is combined with face-to-face teaching using both group based and problem based learning exercises. In blended learning environments afforded by this Pod Room space, emphasis needs to be placed on:

- o Redesign of the conventional face-to-face classroom activities to take advantage of the potential for interactivity that the technology-enhanced learning environment provides;
- o Designing the online activities to take advantage of "time on task" and
- o Creating opportunities for increased learner control of their learning using both group and team-based activities as well as time for independent learning (Skill & Young, 2002).

How is the space used?

A common activity is to set each group an exercise requiring the use of the pod-based computer where students can access information via the Internet and prepare information for presentation to other students and the teacher. During the activity time, the teacher can preview the work of each pod on the master pod computer (Figure 3). This can help to put the students in the right direction, or to stop students from wandering to sites other than those that are the focus of the class. At the end of the activity,

GAIL WILSON, MARCUS RANDALL
BOND UNIVERSITY, AUSTRALIA

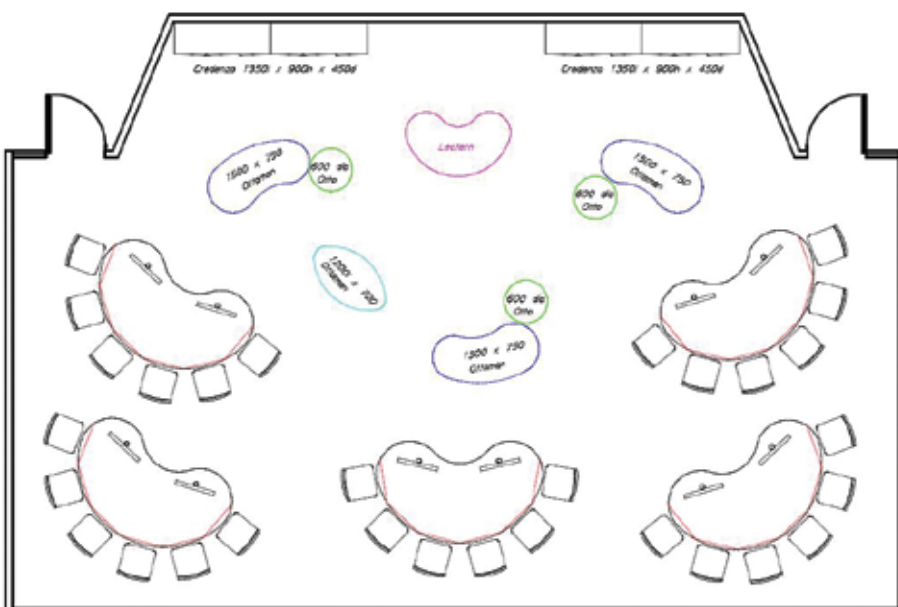


Figure 1 . Plan of the pod room.

Figure 2. Pod room from entrance.



Figure 3. Master pod/control panel.



Figure 4. Individual pod.



Figure 5. Pod and ottoman furniture.

the teacher can display the solutions from each pod on the projector screen at the front of the room for class analysis and discussion.

The room also has informal breakout capacity in the form of several ottomans. This furniture can be pushed into any configuration and serve to allow groups to talk with one another, away from the pod area. Teachers are also using them to bring students together at the end of a class for a final discussion and overview of the learning that has taken place in that particular class. Whiteboards are provided along the sides of the room and are used to support discussion and summarising (Figure 3).

How is the technology used?

The technology is an integral, yet not overwhelming, part of the Pod Room. It has been designed as an affordance, or as a way of supporting the learning process, rather than something that is learned about, such as in training students to use a computer in a computer laboratory. In many ways this hides the fact that the Pod Room is a technologically sophisticated room. Its features can best be described in terms of two principle components—the master pod (Figure 3) and the group pods.

1. The Master Pod (Figure 3).

The master pod is the facilitator's workspace and is used to control the entire room. These controls are completely inbuilt into a single touch panel (Figure 6). The technological features of the master pod include:

- All lighting. There are front and back house lights, as well as down lights for each pod. Each light can be controlled individually from the Master Pod.
- The two projectors. These are Mitsubishi HD4000 wide screen projectors. Figure 6 shows the on-screen controls.
- Image switching (Figure 6). Images from each pod (including the master pod) can be switched to any other pod or projector. This flexibility gives the room many of its educational advantages. The teacher/facilitator may also choose to preview the image on their screen first before putting to another device, such as a projector.
- Document camera. This is a Lumen DC160.
- DVD Player. This is Sony DVPN78P.
- Touch Pen. The pen acts as a mouse and an annotation tool.
- External AV and Computer Input. The teacher can use their own computer and/or video equipment instead of the computers at each pod.

2. The Student Pods

Each pod has its own network enabled computer system with two 19" monitors (Figure 4). Like the master pod, there are facilities that allow students to connect their own computer to the pod. Additionally, a lighting control is mounted in each desk that allows the students to change the level of lighting directly over their pod.

How is the facility being evaluated?

A pilot program in the use of the Pod Room began in May 2008 and is continuing until the end of this year. This pilot involves a small group of six

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References

Skill, T. & Young, B. (2002). Embracing the hybrid model: Working at the intersections of virtual and physical learning spaces. In N. Chism & D. Bickford (Eds.), *The importance of physical space in creative supportive learning environments* (pp. 23-32). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.