

E-LEARNING CAFE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PORTO: ICT INFLUENCE ON THE DESIGN OF SOCIAL LEARNING SPACES

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The present research project is three-fold:

- (i) to upgrade and transform an unused university building into a new social and study space, taking advantage of ICT functionalities by integrating them into the proposed design and by using them as active communication tools within the design process;
- (ii) to monitor the use of ICT along the design process as an important communication tool for all the players involved (design team and potential users of that space);
- (iii) to monitor how this new space is perceived and utilized by the university population;

The overall aim of this project is to start creating a set of new dynamic learning spaces that integrate social and study activities and that constitute a strategic relational dimension for all the people working or studying at the University of Porto (UP). In this context, the design of this space has made use of ICT for creating a rich communicational and learning environment, i.e., wireless networking, access to collaborative software, power source for mobile computing devices and other functionalities. Thus the program of this e-learning café and its spatial configuration and Internet site aims to encourage several types of group interaction, both for socializing and studying, to promote interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge and experience and to offer people a set of diverse social and cultural events such as courses, readings, performances, workshops, etc. One important characteristic of this environment is its physical and virtual nature (the building and its Internet site), which, linked together, create a richer relational dimension. The result is communication between people who may be seated far apart and a strong interrelation of ICT with space design, allowing for different types of spatial use and functions.

The project is still in phase (i), which means that the transformation and renovation of the building is under way and that the first version of the e-learning café site (<http://elearningcafe.up.pt>) is already online. Up to now, the site has been used for reaching the following objectives: (1) to communicate and simulate the new e-learning café design; (2) to inform about the organizational structure and program contents of the e-learning café and (3) to survey the opinion of the potential users of the e-learning cafe space through a short questionnaire which visitors can complete after viewing the explanation and simulation of the proposed design.

The paper first describes the strategy applied for (1) integrating some important ICT functionalities in the design of the e-learning café space and for (2) using different representation methods and computer visualization techniques to communicate its design. It then proceeds to analyze the results of the questionnaire and the qualitative responses gathered until the present moment. These quantitative and qualitative data provide some positive information about how people perceived and judged both the content (the proposed design) and the form (the representation methods and techniques used for visualizing images). Nevertheless, further data need to be collected and studied in order to draw a set of more reliable conclusions.