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The Netherlands' Study
House: New Designs for
New Pedagogies

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THE NETHERLANDS' STUDY HOUSE: NEW DESIGNS FOR NEW PEDAGOGIES

Upon leaving school, many people, despite their years of study, are deficient in basic workplace and tertiary level competencies.

This has been the assertion of Dutch business leaders and tertiary educational authorities for some years (this is by no means restricted to the Netherlands but is a world-wide problem). Consistently, it is suggested that these graduates do not have the ability to work in teams, solve problems, organise their own workload, undertake research or work with limited supervision.

As a result of feedback by employers and tertiary institutions, an innovative form of "learning architecture" is emerging in secondary schools in the Netherlands. Dutch curriculum authorities decided that an entirely new approach was required. Both teachers and learners needed a physical environment far removed conceptually from the traditional classroom, to expose them to new ways of curriculum delivery.

The curriculum

Rather than taking the usual step of trying to adapt existing individual school subject curricula to achieve competency objectives, they have created a new pedagogical approach for *all* subjects which is called the Study House.

The Study House is characterised by attention for common skills in learning, research and reflection. The Study House also means a new way of planning – no longer in fixed weekly numbers of lessons per subject, but in fixed numbers of *study hours* per subject. The distribution of these hours over individual study, group work, workshops, plenary exchanges and lectures is left to the teachers, in interplay with the students.

Offered for two hours every day, the new format requires students to approach their subject material in a completely different way. During the allocated two hours they work in the Study House room on all curricula and subjects but ac-



ording to their own priorities. The students can choose to work in teams, as individuals or indeed in traditional class groups if that is agreed to by the cohort. Teachers move from the traditional role of didactic teaching to that of a facilitator or mentor. Students have access to computers, the Internet and other resource material as needed. This approach will become mandatory in August 1999, but some schools have already begun the transition.

Planning

For this new environment, the formal classroom structure of rows of seats and desks facing the front (a tradition for at least 200 years, or since the advent of the industrial revolution) was considered constrictive and no longer viable. A flexible arrangement of clusters of seating, individual workstations, discussion areas, project team areas and display areas was needed.

Subsequently, an architectural solution was explored to accommodate these new pedagogical ideas. The curriculum designers worked with groups of teachers and students to evaluate scenarios. This process saw the gradual evolution of what is now the Study House solution. Initial outcomes of the planning meetings, held at the Oosterlicht School, just outside Utrecht, resulted in layouts of classrooms and staff offices in clusters.

Design

More than five iterations took place, moving from a clustering of traditional classrooms, to open-ended classrooms facing a common area, to a mix of classrooms and workstation layouts, with the final model being an office landscape environment.



The innovative Zoo School in Minnesota, USA, conceived by Bruce Jilk, an architect with the Cunningham Group, and Professor George Copa of the University of Minnesota paved the way for the final solution.

To accommodate the three or four classes totalling 120 students (4x30), there are peninsula tables catering to groups of 10 students. Three peninsulas constitute a traditional classroom cohort of 30.

At the end of each peninsula is a computer terminal connected to the Internet together with networked printers and scanners (reflecting the Netherlands' Ministry of Education target for a computer student ratio of 1:10).

Located in the central space is a flexible series of clusters of seats and tables accommodating five or six students and one teacher. These clusters can be used simply by students in groups, or a teacher can join them to provide group instruction. The teacher can also address the group of 30 in the peninsular arrangement.

The final design layout provides:

- large, flexible open spaces;
- plenty of natural light and views;
- a familiarity with the commercial workplace environment;
- a sense of informality with a variety of spaces for students to select from to suit their learning needs.

Does it work?

When viewed earlier this year, the design and construction were completed but the Study House curriculum and staff development programme for the new initiative were scheduled for the 1998/99 academic year.



Computers were still on order – a critical element to the success of the scheme – as technology would empower the individuals to seek their own knowledge to suit their own needs. However, there was a great sense of excitement and anticipation at the prospect of this new initiative. Some senior teachers were concerned that the staff might “sit back and read the paper whilst students got on with student-centred learning”.

Sceptics might ask, “What is the difference between this new initiative and the failed open plan classrooms of the 1970’s?” There is a world of difference. This programme includes integrated curriculum development, information and communications technology, staff training and development, student-centred learning, flexible delivery and industry and tertiary education competencies all within a physical learning environment custom-designed to enhance these initiatives.

In an environment that is far removed from the traditional classroom, the Study House will give students in the public school system the opportunity to work in teams and set their own tasks, preparing them for higher education and the workplace.



The Bear – the result of the art-in-architecture approach in the Netherlands, intended to ground students in the reality of *reflection-in-action*.

This article was written by Kenn Fisher, recent Acting Head of PEB.