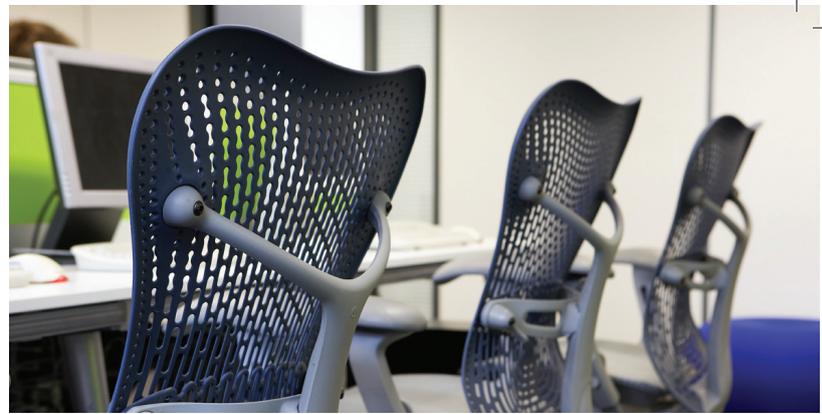


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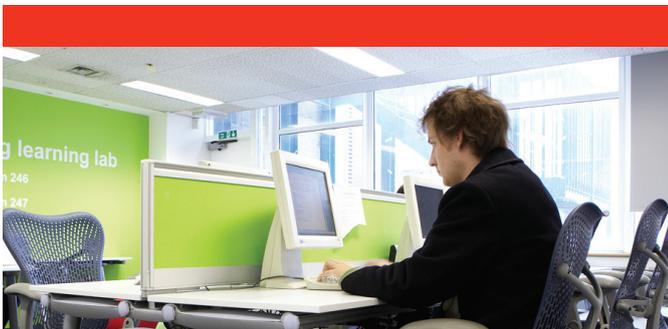
A Learning Life

Professor Alexi Marmot rejoices in an unparalleled international reputation in the research and theoretical development of humane and effective office design. Much of her recent work has been in the education sector and the creation of effective learning spaces, so when she was appointed in 2007 to the Chair of Facility and Environment Management at the Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, University College London, she quickly established a pilot project – The Living Learning Lab – to demonstrate and test her ideas and research findings on her own students.

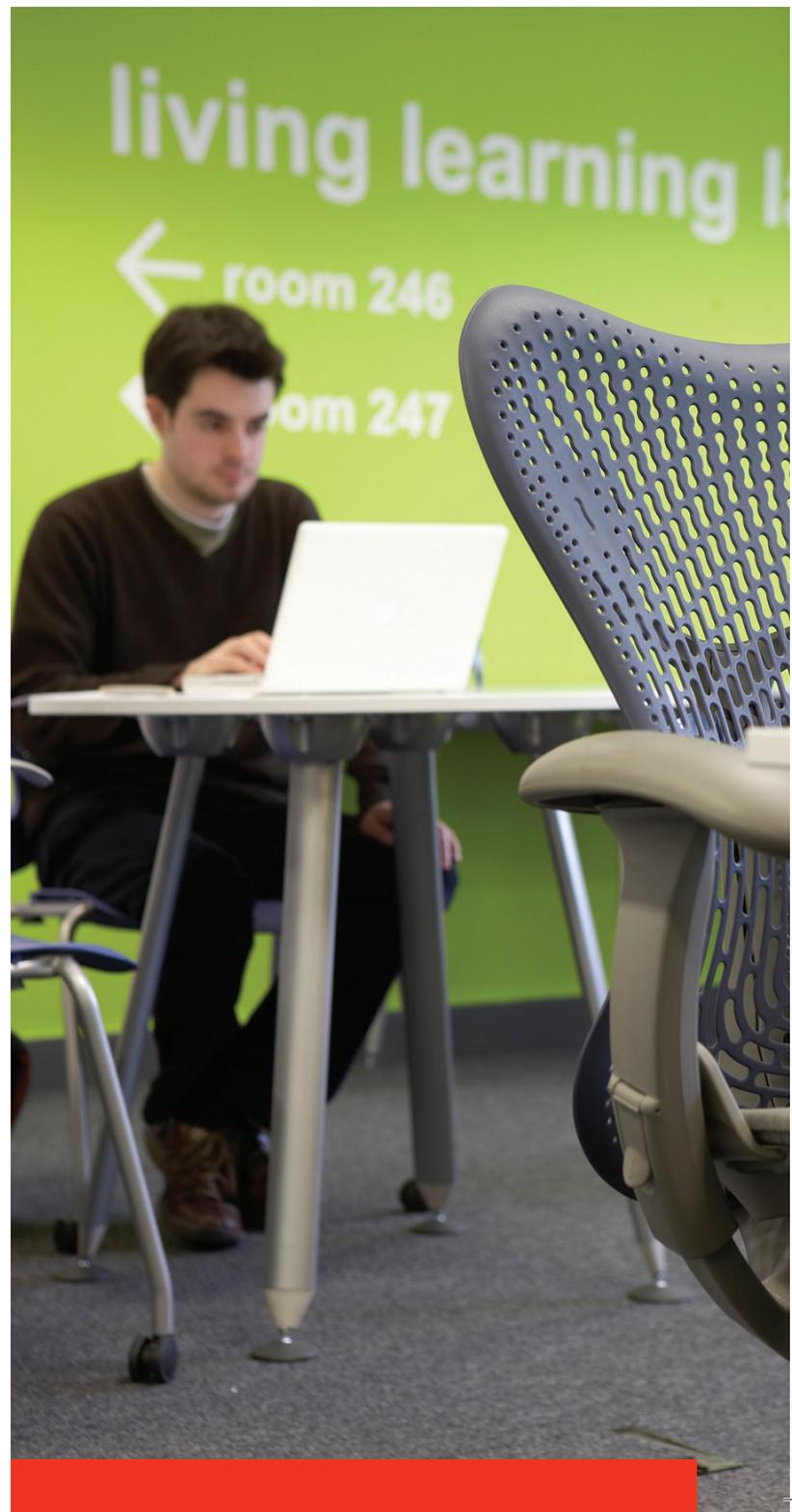
Now that the UK must compete internationally as a knowledge economy, says Marmot, we must have an educated workforce, the creation of an educational style which teaches critical thinking rather than just the acquisition of knowledge. This shift has massive implications for teaching methods (now ‘learning methods’) and the end of the ‘craft based’ system where a small number of students gather round a single staff member in a formal seminar or lecture.

Now the emphasis is on mobility (‘m-learning’), technology (‘e-learning’) and the three key learning styles supported by ‘student-centred’ teaching modes – learning by reflection, learning by doing, and learning by conversation – which all impact on conceptualising new learning spaces. Simultaneously, universities are under pressure to deliver more and better educated people with the same or even less resource.

Which is where the Living Learning Lab comes in. Why not, thought Marmot, create a pilot project to explore and illuminate the ideas, and to set up an evaluation process?



‘Many educational buildings fail as spaces for learning,’ says Marmot, ‘due to poor air quality and inadequate environmental features such as light and acoustics.’ It’s certainly true that the Living Learning Lab site in the UCL/Bartlett building in central London, had all the dingy, lacklustre charmlessness of a typical neglected public sector interior, with its overall grey theme. First steps were to sort out the lighting, maximising daylight where possible, repaint the walls and eliminate large areas of scrappy, messy noticeboards.



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But with such a low budget project, pretty much all the change is in the furniture. Marmot is enthusiastic about the Herman Miller ranges she chose from, and also the support and commitment she received from the Miller sales team. Abak Environments and Transmic chairs, desks and tables, some Balieri soft occasional furniture, and the Mirra and Caper conference chairs add a brisk contemporary feel to the now light, airy and businesslike space. 'The chairs are comfortable,' says Marmot. 'They replaced ones with hard seats and hard backs.' A seemingly small thing, but crucial in the change of philosophy that underpins the new ideas about learning.

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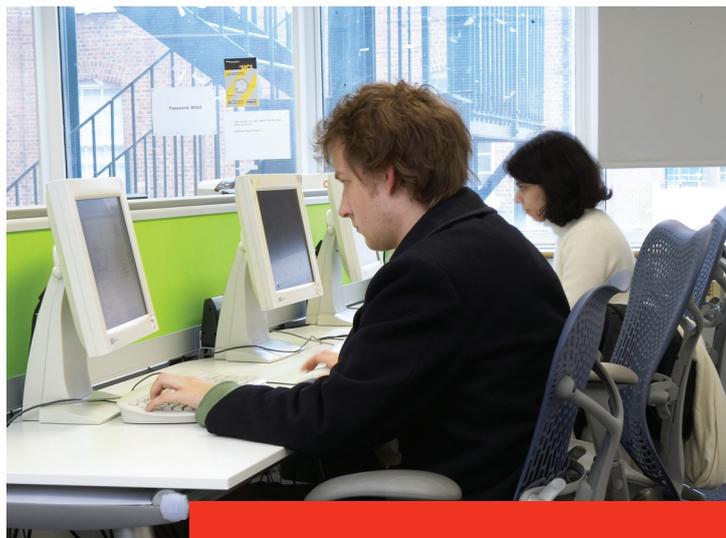
The social aspect of the process has also been comprehensively dealt with. Staff and students were emphatic about the need for proper facilities to make drinks and chat – the 'breakout' space essential in enlightened office design. A kitchen has been created that serves both students and staff, and is obviously working well as a focus for the informal exchanges that make such a crucial contribution to both office and educational life.

IT, including AV equipment, is also well specified and well supported, given the emphasis on mobile and remote learning. LCD screens have replaced pinboards, and the whole feel of the comparatively small area is crisp, clean, fresh and lively. Again playing a much more important part than is immediately apparent, the fresh green colourways and typography of the signage send a blunt branding message – you know for certain you are in an area of the building with a specific identity and a specific purpose.

How to tell if all this works? It takes time, of course. 'There are five criteria for judging educational effectiveness,' says Marmot. 'We need to show that we are teaching more efficiently – using space, resources, people; that there is less dropping out; more lecture attendance; better results in exams and coursework; and longer knowledge retention.' And judging by the relaxed but focused atmosphere of concentration and discussion – of learning - in the space during my visit, there should be no problem about amply demonstrating success in all five. All other universities – and indeed, schools and colleges – take note.



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