

Chapter 4

Designing Small Spaces: A Case Study of the Florida International University Digital Writing Studio

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case is useful as a model for institutions creating media labs in small spaces with a limited budget and advances a discussion of effective design among scholars, K-12 educators, a range of industries, and the corporate sector. By addressing how small spaces can function effectively for users, the author encourages representatives from these areas to design media labs in usable ways. The study begins by arguing for a user-centered approach to designing digital media labs in order to engage stakeholders in the design process. Then, the chapter explains the process of how the author engaged users while piloting several iterations of the Florida International University Digital Writing Studio, reporting what was learned about designing the space. Finally, the study investigates the usability of the Digital Writing Studio through a usability test meant to investigate the functionality of the space for collaboration among users. This case demonstrates a challenge that many must take on at a time when budgets are being cut and space is difficult to secure. Usability methods of inquiry can help create a space designed in part by stakeholders—a method that this case argues can be built into annual program assessment.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Florida International University (FIU) proudly serves the local community and advertises this fact by boasting a student body concentrated of 90% Miami-Dade county residents. Each year since 2006, the FIU Office of Planning and Institutional Research shows that at least one-fourth of the incoming class are first-generation college students. For FIU, non-traditional is the norm. Many students return to school while working full-time jobs, raising children, and getting married or divorced and are more proficient in a language or languages other than English. As the number one university in the United States granting bachelors and masters degrees to Hispanic students (FIU Office of Planning & Institutional Research), FIU also educates a great deal of public school teachers in Miami-Dade county; 50% of Miami-Dade K-12 teachers are FIU alumni (FIU Office of Planning & Institutional Research). The English Department at FIU is equally as vibrant as the university. There are programs in the study of Literature, Film Studies, Exile Studies, Linguistics, Creative Writing, and Writing and Rhetoric. Majors from the English Department successfully pursue a variety of careers, including those in academia, education, law, technical and professional writing, and creative writing.

The diversity of FIU makes divergent forms of curriculum and assessment necessary. Students and faculty use technology to mediate teaching, research, and service activities with exciting and fresh cultural pathways. Collaboration in this environment is all at once rhizomic and networked and requires a smart technological infrastructure to provide access and theoretical grounding for participants. In 2010 when FIU president M. Rosenberg released his strategic plan for the university, the English Department took seriously his goal to build an effective technological foundation and began planning for the Digital Writing Studio (DWS)—a media lab to innovate the work of students and faculty in the department. Meanwhile, the department readily understood that across the state of Florida higher education budgets were being cut in order to keep up with the changing economy and had to somehow provide more technological support with less funding—a truly challenging feat.

A shrinking budget, however, does not necessarily mean sacrificing innovation. There are fiscally responsible *and* cutting-edge ways to rethink technology support projects so that their educational impact is not diminished. For instance, collaborative, media-enhanced teaching and learning media labs can be creatively developed in small spaces on a limited budget. Furthermore, to develop small spaces in a sustainable (and a cost-effective) manner, relying on a user-centered approach to engage stakeholders in the design and implementation process can create a sort of *infection model* (Papper, Reynolds, & Rice, 2000). That is, a model of sustainable curriculum and assessment development that is organic and emphasizes multiple contexts and use. While the infection model is certainly not limited to small spaces,

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