Purposes of Using Informal Social Learning Spaces by Students: A Case Study of Business School in Sri Lanka

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both the authors contributed to design the study, analyze the data and write up the manuscript. The data collection was done by author BA. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Business Schools are more than mere collections of classrooms and offices, rather destinations for studying, collaboration, group discussions, and they contribute to developing a sense of community among students and faculty. The literature illustrates almost zero essences on how managerial decision-making about space concerns affect students or faculty. In fact, it is been noted o reflect their understanding of the purpose of physical spaces mostly in its outward form which then interpreted by observers following their socially constructed decoding. The main objective of this study is to examine for what purposes students are using informal Social Learning Spaces. This is a qualitative case study based on a Business School in Sri Lanka. The data were gathered through focus group interviews and observations held at three different purpose-built informal social learning spaces at the selected Business School and analyzed using the thematic framework. In this exploration, the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and judgments of students are brought into the discussion. The findings revealed that students use social learning spaces for their studying, leisure, and networking purposes. Therefore, by providing

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informal social learning spaces for students to engage themselves in educational activities can make an influence on higher learning outcomes in academic, personal, and social aspects of their life.

Keywords: Informal social learning spaces; purposes; students; business school; case study.

ABBREVIATIONS

FGI : Focus Group Interview
ILA : Interactive Learning Area
JISC : Joint Information Systems Committee
NSSE : National Survey of Student Engagement
OISA : Open Informal Study Area
SC : Student Centre
SLS : Social Learning Space/s

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning is identified as largely a social process, which is enriched when students can conceptualize and, critically think about academic problems with others [1]. When it comes to learning space studies, accumulating research is found on how to develop formal teaching spaces that are more interactive. Formal learning is referred as that occurs in the designated classrooms, and Informal learning occurs outside designated classes and lectures [2]. Though the traditional view of learning assumed that learning should only be confined to formal designated spaces, modern views on learning acknowledge that, most of the learning occurs in informal spaces, which are not originally designed as learning spaces [3]. This study will be focusing on 'informal' social learning spaces [SLS] which act as a medium in which the academic and social aspects of the university life of a student coexist [4,5]. Though there had been few recent studies on this area in the global context, surprisingly such evidence in Sri Lankan higher education context is hard to find in literature.

Two major developments in today's higher education sector, has made it necessary to explore the purposes of students using informal SLS. First is, as contemporary students have different expectations of learning, there is a need for varying spatial settings to meet their needs [6]. The ever-increasing inter-disciplinary studies have raised the need for organizing physical space which suit for collaborative activities. Hence, today many higher education institutions are looking for alternative spaces that can facilitate learner-centered activities to support the

community and to promote educational needs of numerous student groups. Secondly, the ongoing technological advancements in terms of mobile devices like; notebooks or laptops, smart phones, have allowed learning to happen anywhere on campus, not only indoor spaces [7, 8].

Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine for what purposes students are using informal Social Learning Spaces as that will be considered as important in exploring both the social and academic aspects of student experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researches had speculated that learning space features do encourage social interactions and enhance positive attitudes and learning experiences [9,10]. In that case informal physical spaces of campuses are predominantly recognized as the containers, as they provide the context for interactions in this regard [11]. Hence, recently, academic focus has been placed on the exploration of the informal [12] and implicit [13] elements of the Business School environment, and the potential of such environments to serve the development of various aspects in terms of managerial competencies [14].

2.1 Informal Social Learning Spaces [SLS)

According to Ken A. Graetz [15], the informal SLS evoke positive emotional responses and lead to better learning with strong emotional attachment in which students love to learn, and remember fondly when they reflect their learning experiences. As learning is considered to be a social activity, creation of physical SLS which are welcoming and encouraging to meet, to talk, and to work as small groups are important [16]. As suggested by Strange and Banning [10] learning can be enhanced by making students available with spaces that are socially catalytic just to hangout, and like a third place to neither live nor work while exploring new relationships and strengthening existing ones.

As elaborated by Parsons [17] in his study, the students had learned the norms, rules, and rituals of their future professions as a result of participating in informal SLS. Students had shown persistent sense of community which resulted in a higher academic performance with self-empowerment [18]. According to Woolner, Hall [19], as learning spaces consist of complicated physical and social contextual relations, it's difficult to make causal claims about its nature. Hence, flexible SLS should be designed across both formal and informal curriculum, as the key theme of learning is always situated within communities of practice.

According to Ndofirepi [20], the learning commons model had extended the relevance of libraries' physical and functional spaces beyond their own agendas to incorporate campus–wide initiatives by focusing on the student support for a range of individual and collaborative student activities [2]. Hence, the idea of transforming libraries to incorporate learning commons has created such spaces for in supporting students social learning experience. As learning commons encourage learning through dialogue, problem solving, and information sharing [2] and even studying alone in a supportive atmosphere [20].

In modern building developments in higher education sector, one of the common features seen is, having central focal point within buildings, which provide a social space for high-quality discussion as well as refreshments. And the space is open to staff, students as well as visitors [2]. Therefore, this modern intermingling has enriched students' opportunities by exposing them to a variety of communities.

It was evident in literature that, research on informal SLS deserves further attention, as it is been limited up to this point. Therefore, the implications of purpose-built informal SLS on student learning is been set as the scope of this research and will be explored with a qualitative research design.

2.2 Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory suggested that people learn from one another in different settings, through observation, imitation, and modeling. This theory has usually linked behaviorist and cognitive learning theories because it covered attention, memory, and motivation as necessary conditions for effective modeling. Bandura and Walters [21], said that people learn through observing behaviors and attitudes of others, as well as outcomes of those behaviors. Social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences.

Further, Bandura and Walters [21] defined personality as an interaction between three components. They are the environment, behavior, and psychological processes of an individual. The theory of social learning is related to Vygotsky's Social Development theory and Lave's Situated Learning theory, as they also emphasized the importance of social learning.

2.3 Experiential Learning Theory

According to experiential learning theory, learning was defined as an interaction between two interdependent knowledge dimensions: acquisition and transformation where in both, it is required to resolve a set of competing learning tensions. In acquisition, the individuals must resolve the tension between apprehension [concrete experience) and comprehension [abstract conceptualization) [22].

According to Chickering and Gamson [23], apprehension is about how a person acquires new knowledge through sensory perceptions and direct experiences with outside world through feelings and emotions, while comprehension is acquiring knowledge through abstract concepts and symbolic representations by breaking down experience into meaningful events and placing them in a symbolic system of society. Further, Chickering and Gamson [23] elaborate on process of 'learning by intention' and 'learning by extension' where in the former, learner move inward to reflect on previously gained knowledge and in the latter, learners move beyond themselves to interact with external society.

2.4 Knowledge-creating Theory

The theory of knowledge creation argued that the knowledge emerges as a dynamic and inter-linked interaction from an individual-to-societal level [24]. Also, the theory had introduced a Japanese concept called 'ba', with the meaning of a shared space, as the foundation for knowledge creation [25] in which tacit knowledge is embedded [22], and can be acquired through own experience or reflections on the experiences of others [25]. According to Kolb and Kolb [22], that knowledge be cleared through sharing

feelings, thoughts, and experiences of and among people in the space by removing the barriers and promoting care, love, trust, and commitment between individuals. Therefore, learning spaces will equally demand norms for psychological safety, clear purpose, and respect to enhance learning. Such spaces are termed as informal SLS [4] in this study context.

2.5 Empirical Findings

Various research on higher education convince the fact that students learn mostly when they study individually or collaboratively in informal settings like cafeterias, dormitories, student unions, etc. in fact when they are away from formal classroom [26,27] because those SLS help to increase interaction, collaboration and social engagement among students through multiple processes [8]. Radloff [28] had found students spend 80% of their time at informal spaces like libraries, refectories, cafes or bars, rather than scheduled classes even though those spaces were not intentionally designed for learning purposes.

Dugdale [7] suggested the facility available for refreshment/meals at SLS as a strong purpose of using SLS. Further, SLS facilitate socialization among students as it allows them to meet new friends, engage in group work with diverse conversation while taking feedback [7,29]. Respectively, a variety of needs including studying, relaxing, observing people, chatting, being comfortable and pleased, having meal and waiting for a friend, were explained as some other uses of SLS.

Matthews et al. [30] in his study which investigated the impact SLS has on student engagement, he asked from students to explain what they really do in those SLS. And the answers were classified into four broader areas of activities. Those categories were, individual-based activities, group-based activities, social-based activities, and either individual- or group-based activities. According to Matthews et al. [4], the students were reported with activities where they spent lot of time with fellow students and lecturers, discussing ideas outside the class time.

The findings of Matthews et al. [4], suggested a clear correlation between the usage of SLS and the aspects of student engagement. According to Braxton et al. [31], special attention should be given towards new students as their integration into both the academic and university culture is vital in their transition period. This was further proven with evidence that, the role of SLS in building a sense of belonging and developing peer-to-peer and student-to-staff interactions.

Radloff [28] has stressed the need for SLS and recognized its role in creating a shared interaction among student communities. Recent developments in HE had paid more attention to 'cafe culture learning' as SLS. For example, 'Cafe´ Scientifique' in Science Museum in London stimulated scientific discussion and learning among adult students who rarely engaged, and rarely attend, science events [32].

Peker and Ataöv [33] have used content analysis to examine both verbal and nonverbal expressions of students regarding their learning experiences and those design attributes related to their learning. According to the findings, nearly half of the responses included learning activities like; group discussions, individual studying, and peer consultation, reconfirming the findings of previous studies [7,8,34]. Some of the activities that students expressed as been done at SLS were, relaxing, chatting, taking coincidental meetings, and sharing day-today issues. These new concepts brought up to the existing literature, highlight the importance of social exchange opportunities those are emerged at informal learning spaces.

Walker and Baepler [35] concluded in their study that social context matters in student learning in different ways. Further, Bennett [26] indicated that the management of universities should design learning spaces considering the service and operations transmitted through the spaces rather than concerns about the nature of the learning experience that should occur in the space. Therefore, in Bennett [26]'s study in 2007 he had proposed, six questions that universities should ask continuously when constructing or renovating learning spaces. Mostly the discussion had drawn based on the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE) which indeed is helpful tool in analyzing the research questions of this study as well.

3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research is a social enquiry that emphasizes a complex, holistic, systematic examination of different experiences in social and natural spaces [36]. Hence, this is a qualitative study that employed the case study

method for examining students' learning experiences on purpose-built informal SLS in its natural setting [37]. A case study is an empirical study that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and with its real-life context [38]. The study used primary data collected mainly through focus group interviews [39]. Focus group interview is a technique that employs in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected purposively of a specific population, and the group is focused' on a given topic [40]. The method is important in exploring attitudes, knowledge and experiences of people and it can be used to understand what, why and how people think in a particular way [41]. Participants were selected on criteria that they have something to express on the area, have indifferent socio-characteristics and be comfortable talking with the interviewer, and each other [42]. For the data collection, the researcher 'intentionally selected' [39] the first-second year students in the Business School as the site. The intention of targeting on them was that they are been full-time at the university and should have gained considerable learning experiences on purpose-built informal SLS to contribute this study in a significant way. In gathering data, six focus group interviews [FGI] were conducted with observations at the three selected spaces. [two at the *Student Centre [*SC), consisting with 4 participants each, two at *Interactive learning area in library building* [ILA] consisting with 4 participants each and two at *Open informal study area* [OISA] consisting with 5 participants each). Each focus group interview lasted 30-40 minutes. Brief information about the participants of the focus groups is given in Table 1.

The data generated were analyzed using top-down or theoretical thematic analysis, where the researcher followed six-phase guide provided by Braun and Clarke [43] which is a useful framework for conducting this kind of analysis.

Trustworthiness determine whether the findings of the study are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account and is considered one of the strengths of qualitative research [44]. In qualitative literature terms that address trustworthiness, such as validity, authenticity, and credibility are abound [44]. The primary strategy utilized in ensuring external validity was the provision of rich, thick, detailed descriptions

therein in transferability will have a solid framework for comparison [45]. Qualitative research in general considers the researcher's background to be both pivotal and influential in the study [46]. Three techniques were employed to ensure reliability in the study. First, the researcher was clear with the research objectives, as it was to fully rely on the participants' views on their learning experiences on purpose built informal SLS. Yet, the researcher used own backgrounds in shaping the interpretation flowing from personal, cultural, and historical experiences and provided a detailed account of the focus of the informant's position and basis for selection, and the context from which data were gathered [47]. Second, triangulation or multiple methods of data collection was used, to strengthen reliability as well as internal validity [45] as more open-ended discussion with observations was used and the researcher carefully moderated the discussions. Finally, the data collection and analysis strategies were reported in detail to provide a clear and accurate picture of the methods used in the study.

3.1 Context

The choice of the selected Business School is not accidental but anchored on its uniqueness among the other institutes in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. According to Fonseka [48], the institute which the selected Business School belongs to, is noticeable in the history of higher education in Sri Lanka and is a mammoth educational milestone of recent age. This state-of-the-art institute of higher education, serves business, computing and engineering fields with a wide spectrum of degree programs, locally as well as partnered with reputed international universities across the globe. The institution conceptualized and constructed with the essence of world class universities of the Anglo-American model, can accommodate more than 30,000 students on campus [48]. Currently, amongst the three study schools, the 'Business School' holds the largest student population closer to 6000, upholding its pioneering spirit throughout the journey in delivering business education, hence selected as the context of this study. The school provides a variety of tailored spaces [49] where students of Business School can gather, collaborate, study and socialize outside scheduled classes.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Purpose-built Informal SLS	Focus group number	Participant number	Gender	Age	Year of study	Residence (On/Off campus)	Engaged in sports	Member of clubs and societies	Following professional courses	Most preferred informal SLS
SC	FG 1	P 1	F	18-20	1st year	On campus	Y	N	N	SC
		P 2	F	18-20	1st year	Off campus	N	Y	Y	SC
		P 3	M	18-20	1st year	Off campus	N	Y	N	ILA
		P 4	M	18-20	1st year	Off campus	Y	Y	N	SC
	FG 2	P 1	M	18-20	1st year	Off campus	N	Y	N	SC
		P 2	F	21-23	1st year	On campus	Y	Y	Y	ILA
		P 3	M	21-23	2nd year	Off campus	N	Y	Y	ILA
		P 4	M	18-20	1st year	Off campus	Y	Y	Y	SC
ILA	FG 3	P 1	F	21-23	1st year	On campus	Y	Y	Y	ILA
		P 2	M	21-23	1st year	On campus	Y	Y	N	ILA
		P 3	F	18-20	1st year	Off campus	Y	Y	N	SC
		P 4	M	24-26	2nd year	Off campus	Y	Y	N	ILA
	FG 4	P 1	F	21-23	1st year	Off campus	N	N	N	SC
		P 2	F	18-20	1st year	Off campus	N	Y	N	ILA
		P 3	F	21-23	1st year	Off campus	N	N	N	ILA
		P 4	M	21-23	1st year	On campus	Y	Y	Y	ILA
OISA	FG 5	P 1	F	21-23	1st year	On campus	Y	Y	N	OISA
		P 2	F	21-23	2nd year	Off campus	Y	Y	Y	OISA
		P 3	F	21-23	2nd year	Off campus	N	Y	Y	OISA
		P 4	F	21-23	2nd year	Off campus	N	Y	N	OISA
		P 5	F	21-23	2nd year	Off campus	N	Y	Y	OISA
	FG 6	P 1	M	18-20	2nd year	Off campus	Y	Y	N	ILA
		P 2	F	18-20	2nd year	Off campus	Y	Y	N	ILA
		P 3	M	21-23	2nd year	Off campus	N	Y	N	ILA
		P 4	F	18-20	2nd year	Off campus	Y	Y	N	ILA
		P 5	F	18-20	2nd year	Off campus	N	Y	N	ILA

*SC: Student Centre *ILA: Interactive Learning Area in library building *OISA: Open Informal Study Area *P: Participant *F: Female *M: Male

Two main underlying themes that the learning spaces purposely-built [4,30] are, to have 'creative informal learning spaces' with 'the harmony with the environment' [48]. Though increased attention has been given in purpose-built informal learning spaces at the Business School, there has not been any evaluation method to examine for what purposes the students really use them. Among the multiple spaces outside scheduled classes that students gather, collaborate, study, and socialize, the following three spaces are identified and selected for the study as they are purpose-built [4,49] for informal social learning of the students of Business School. Brief description on each follow.

Student Centre [SC]: The student center is purpose-built informal SLS to promote the networking, social activities, life skill development and even private study of students. It has large and obstructed spaces to provide a massive informal study area with a flexible arrangement of furniture. The SC also has a career guidance office, an audio-visual room, a bookshop, club offices that promote extracurricular activities and cubicles for self-study as well as telephone booths.

Interactive learning area in library building [ILA]: The library consists a purpose-built interactive learning area which does not essentially mean to provide an anti-social, silent space, but a social space which invites conversation, catalyzes social interaction among students, promote impromptu conversations and serendipitous meetings, which contribute to personal and professional growth. It is an open library area which is flexibly furnished and well-resourced with shareable digital technology.

Open informal study area [OISA]: This open learning space is located at the center of the Business School surrounded with natural beauty. It is purpose-built to encourage informal contact and collaboration among business students and is designed to facilitate both individual, group and social work so that students can work productively in between classes, through the provision of large and comfortable group working tables and plethora of IT enabled facilities.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

As the researcher found, different groups of individuals seem to be using these informal SLS

for purposes of varied nature. The emerged data on such purposes were categorized based on three main aspects: studying purposes, leisure purposes and networking purposes.

4.2 Studying Purposes

Studying occurs when a student attentively applies his/her mind in trying to learn or understand any subject or event, etc. Participants revealed that they use these spaces for purposes like, studying for examinations, doing assignments, preparing presentations etc. As they commented, the students usually use the ILA for study purposes as they are not allowed just to hang around by authorities themselves.

"We are not allowed to enter here without a purpose, space is usually utilized for group work and assignments, group discussions and research work. We are not allowed to take food inside, we visit here when planning group activities or when required to speak freely as a group when exams, assignments, presentations are ahead" [FG4: P2].

Yet, it was noticed that, for individual study activities that require concentration, mostly students seem not favor open, noisy settings like SC and OISA where talking was allowed. Students explained though they engage in individual studying in these two spaces, they prefer to do individual studies in a closed, quiet learning space like ILA because it is comparatively a quiet area that has student workstations and talking in high volume is not allowed. Other informal SLS at the university were not popular for individual study activities than at home. One student talked about ILA as follows:

"We prefer to do individual studies at home. For individual studies I do not like when noisy. But this place is good if studying alone" [FG3: P4].

Students identified ILA as a place that is ideal for individual studying. As described by them, ILA was an attraction point for most of the individual learners as their preference towards the ability to concentrate. The imposed restrictions prohibiting speaking in high volumes, and the purposely created atmosphere of a space with calmness and quietness has aided students to engage more in individual studying at ILA.

Students emphasized that, the ability to work collaboratively while interacting with others are

essential to all graduates because it widens their opportunities to share knowledge. Therefore, these purpose-built informal SLS are providing a stage for them to work in groups and effectively manage the interdependency and difficulties of interaction and communication among each other.

4.3 Leisure Purposes

Leisure is the free time when a student is not attending to or free from other duties or responsibilities. SC and the OISA were regular attractions for leisure purposes for most of the participants to eat, relax, gossip, and have fun by sharing memories with friends. The below statement show how they spend time and share their personal and academic concerns at these SC in a more relaxed manner.

"When the spaces of canteen are packed, students can bring their lunch here and eat here. We gossip, interact with people and info from outside classroom in this place. We have solved problems both personal and academic here" [FG1: P1).

Most students perceived, SC as a place where they can relax and meet their friends in different batches at the times that they do not have lectures scheduled. In addition to that, they mentioned that it is an open space for them to have their discussions in solving academic related matters also in a more relaxed manner.

One student commented about OISA, and explained how the space has created so much attachment on them in their regular day today life.

"We have so many fun memories here, we have shared so many old stories starting from our schooling days here; all the gossip and drama while eating so many tasty foods together" [FG6: P5).

Moreover, students mentioned that, they come to these spaces to be mentally relaxed by listening to some music alone with their headsets, while enjoying the beauty of nature.

"As it's in an open environment it provides relaxation to the mind while studying or working, I usually listen to music here" [FG5: P1).

At the same time students showed a lot of fond towards SC as it enables them to do so many

activities without much restriction when compared with other two purpose-built informal SLS. Though participants did not mention in the discussion, observational data found to be somewhat misaligned with comments they provided. Because researcher observed that some students often go into the SC and OISA to watch films, to play video games and to pass time with their partners though they did not mention. But in terms of proportion, such incidents were rare.

As such, many students were attracted to SC as groups because they can create noise there, making the SC unique from other purpose-built informal SLS, particularly the ILA. The ability to make noise in the SC was perceived by the students as a positive light in group activities. Students explained that one of the main reasons that they prefer SC is because they can make noise, talk, eat, and socialize. As one participant commented:

"When we just want to relax in a long day of lectures, we come to the SC because when you go to the library, it is all quiet. But in SC we can have a bit of fun with friends, studying or not studying depends on your mood at that time" [FG2: P3).

Also, students expressed their great addon towards the rock area situated in the SC which they use to hang around without any control by authorities. Students also mentioned that usually they come to this rock area when they are working with things like painting, preparing decorations for various events, and to have birthday parties.

"We usually celebrate our birthdays downstairs over the rock, we can sing there also, we throw get together events over the rock" [FG1: P2 and P4).

In addition, when the degree program is characterized with back to back lectures with long hours, students identified OISA as a good space that brings them together and give a relaxing time. As they expressed:

"When we have small breaks in between the lectures we tend to come outside and quickly eat and run to the lecture halls" [FG4: P1).

Relaxation is an important element to student community, though most students are familiar with the pressure by nature due to numerous

study commitments and the burden it brings, it really should not be that way. Relaxation is important for student's peace of mind and for the quality of their study.

4.4 Networking Purposes

Networking assist students in developing contacts or exchanging information with other parties in an informal network. Students believed that by engaging in various activities at these spaces they can develop their social skills to get the ability to read emotions, to cooperate, to make friends, and negotiate conflicts. Moreover, students liked these spaces because they can have a 'social break' and the purpose-built informal SLS provide them with.

"I feel more actively engaged when I'm with my friends. Let's say I went on a day like back to back lecturers after that my day would be very lethargic and slowed down, in that case if I hang out with my friends or do something active, I would be more active from the next day" [FG1: P1].

The students explained that, this need for networking plays a major role in their academic life too, as it helps them to freshen up more positively amidst their busy academic schedules. Students also explained how they met their friends at these spaces. They strongly believed that these spaces are clear platforms to exchange ideas, make new friends and strengthen their existing relationships with friends. This concern is illustrated in the statement below.

"Yes, we have made so many friends because of this place, as there is a regular group of people we meet here. A small greeting, smile eventually led to many good friendships" [FG2: P1].

The students seemed valuing their relationships with friends a lot. And as they explained, they have created a great bond in between those friend circles.

"We have cried together, laughed together here, when we come in the morning, we don't feel we should go home, until the buses leave, we tend to hang around" [FG4: P4].

The students believed that these informal SLS have enabled them to have conversations with students outside their normal friend circle and culture, to listen other ideas empathically and critically, to engage with people who have varied skills, different cultures and experiences, to think innovatively and to manage time and processes effectively.

4.5 Discussion

The participants perceived the main purpose of using an informal SLS as, creating an opportunity for interaction and collaboration as similarly mentioned by Sailer and Penn [50]. This highlighted the importance of designing informal SLS in such a way that promotes social interaction without much formality and rigidity. Therefore, the findings agreed with Temple's [16] opinion that students can utilize the learning spaces to achieve the intended learning outcomes only when they are flexible.

The findings convinced that students use these spaces for their study purposes such as studying for examinations, to do assignments, research work and to practice and prepare for presentations. In social learning theory, knowledge is identified as something situated inside communities instead inside people's heads [51]. Therefore, the students found to be engaged in acquiring knowledge through participation at these SLS.

But in the findings, there were rare instances where the spaces were used for individual studying in contrast to the observation of Matthews, and Walton [30] as they saw in their findings many students working independently even though the SLS was designed to encourage social exchange. Yet, in this study it was observed that most of the students were engaged in group studying. But some students were engaged in individual based activities such as listening to music alone with their headsets and playing computer games, but such incidents were infrequent.

Apart from studying purposes, a variety of leisure purposes were also pointed out as uses of these purpose-built informal SLS. Those uses included, relaxing during/after lectures, chatting with each other, eating, sharing memories and waiting for a friend as was confirmed by Oblinger [29] and Dugdale [7]. Additionally, they were found to be comfortable and pleased enjoying the beauty of nature.

The informal SLS are purposely built in universities to increase social interaction, collaboration and student engagement and

promote multiple activities that support student learning. The theory of knowledge creation by Nonaka and Konno [25], confirms that tacit knowledge can only be explicit through sharing feelings, experiences and thoughts among others. The findings affirmed that, these SLS are used by students for their various networking purposes as they provide opportunities for socialization such as associating new people, taking part in group discussions, engaging in diverse conversations, taking feedback, and giving reflections.

The study revealed that students use informal SLS for different purposes such as; consulting each other, taking coincidental meetings, and sharing current daily issues [both personal and academic) as were found by [7,8,33]. In addition to above, the study found out that informal SLS are used for purposes such as painting, preparing decorations for various events at the university, and to celebrate birthdays. Further, the study found that these informal SLS have provided a podium for students when negotiating conflicts among themselves and listening to ideas of other students empathically and critically.

Additionally, students seemed to be using these spaces for taking 'social breaks' [4] as it provides them a platform for their social activities such as making new friends and strengthening their existing relationships, having a dialogue with students outside the normal friend circle and culture etc. Also, the researcher's observation remarked that students use these spaces to watch films in their laptops and to spend time with their partners.

The study disclosed that when students do not have their lectures scheduled, they usually come to these informal SLS or, they go to the cafeteria to eat, or go to recreation center either to use gym or play some sport, or they go to the minimart to shop. Henceforth, it confirms the Radloff [28]'s suggestion that 80% of student time is spent informally outside the scheduled classes, in places like recreation center, cafeteria, yet those places are being used as areas for study even though they have not been deliberately designed for that purpose.

5. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study offers an in-depth exploration on, for what purposes students are using informal social

learning spaces in a Business School in Sri Lanka and it was found that students use it for several purposes: study purposes, leisure purposes and networking purposes.

The study appears to support the argument that, spatial designing of informal SLS which emerged from the voices of students as an important factor in determining the student preferences over learning spaces as well as their learning behaviors. By facilitating informal SLS for students to engage themselves in educational activities can make an influence on higher learning outcomes in academic, personal, and social aspects of students' life. Hence, they should be made a part of designing and developing the informal SLS in higher education institutions.

Yet, this study sample was only limited to students in the Business School. But the selected three purpose-built informal SLS are free to be used by students at other schools as well. For example, the SC and ILA are common to students at other schools. Hence, another avenue for further research would be to conduct a study extending the sample covering students at all other schools to reveal interesting insights on students learning experiences.

Notwithstanding the complexities associated with a qualitative study, the emerged concerns cannot be generalized to the whole population or other faculties or other universities. Hence, a study using the quantitative research design will provide more generalizable outcomes, perhaps would ascertain causal relationship between informal SLS and student learning outcomes.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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