Library Spaces for the Scholarship Process

The following excerpt is based on an interview conducted at the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) 2010 Fall Member Meeting. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://www.educause.edu/er/GaryStrong>.

Gerry Bayne: One of the elements planned for the space being redesigned at the UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library is a research commons for digital scholarship. Can you describe this new space? What sorts of tools and features will this research commons contain?

Gary E. Strong: We wanted to conceptualize a space that would engage faculty and students and become a destination for scholarly activity, inquiry, and discovery on the campus. We’re renovating the first floor. The collections will remain in the building. We’ve moved eighty-five staff out of the building in order to make space for students and faculty. Over time we had sort of chewed away at the public space in order to accommodate staff spaces and behind-the-scenes operations. An important concept here is that we are separating those things that belong to the librarians and are returning to the faculty and students what belongs to them. So half of the first floor will be a traditional reading room, but with a reduced print research collection and robust electronic reference tools. The other half will be collaborative spaces. This research commons will be looking at how we engage digital scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and the arts in the journey toward discovery of new knowledge, and how we support the kinds of collaborations that students and faculty want to have. Many of the courses today, particularly the interdisciplinary courses, support student-faculty and student group interaction.

We also want to embed librarianship into those interactions, in a new way. So activities that occur within the research commons will be very much tied to our digital library, special collections, and primary source materials that we’ve always had—because the research library has always been the laboratory for the humanities—but served up in new and different ways. The first floor will comprise open pods with lots of technology, the Laboratory for Digital Cultural Heritage, group study spaces, instructional spaces, and a conference space.

And then there will be something we call “the street.” This is a huge building, and there was no way-finding before. You just walked in and thought: “Where do I go?” The street will divide the traditional and the new. It will be a pedestrian walkway on which we have featured three mediascapes to which we can push digital projects, virtual exhibitions, public programs—a variety of different things. Part of what we want to accomplish here is for people to see the process of scholarship, the process of discovery. We could push the interactive portion of the laboratory, for example, out to a mediascape so that someone could actually see what’s happening back in the laboratory in the research commons as students work with digital resources and “create new things.” How do you help people become aware of what this process is all about? We’ve never been able to do this in the past. You can’t open someone’s head and look at how their brain is processing primary source materials to look for new dimensions and new knowledge. We hope to capture some small piece of that process and be able to show the process as the collaborations work.

Finally, there will be a café. We’ll caffeinate up the users during the hours we’re open.

Bayne: Can you talk a little bit about the partnership between the UCLA Research Library and the Center for Digital Humanities? How did that partnership come about? What were the issues and opportunities surrounding the creation of that partnership?

Strong: The partnership started with our focus on how to develop our digital library. We knew we had a fairly limited context of resources that we could use to create our digital library. So at the outset, we began to look at faculty collaborations. What do faculty need in order to teach—in order to do their research? Most important, how can we structure collaborations so that faculty bring graduate students to the table, resulting in low-cost talent being engaged in our digital projects but also getting something out of the collaboration in terms of credit or recognition or the potential to publish? To date, all of our digital projects have started with that concept.

Faculty from the humanities and social sciences, particularly the humanities, have been early partners: Hypercities, the Roman Forum, the UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology (http://www.cdh.ucla.edu/research/dhprojects.html). All of these projects needed space, but they also needed partners who had knowledge about metadata, knowledge about technical systems, and knowledge about the primary resources required. We’ve supported the St. Gall Project, for example, by digitizing thousands of original manuscripts so that students and faculty can see not only the
original artifact but also the digital surrogate. They can begin to compare artifacts and look for anomalies; they enlarge parts of the digital surrogate and then look at the original. This wasn’t about simply creating a surrogate experience: it was about linking primary sources and the digital scholarship arena around the collaboration.

Bayne: Is there anything you’d like to share with other institutions that might be thinking about collaborating on this level?

Strong: I’m not sure I have any silver bullet or any answers. But what’s beginning to work for us is our respect for the faculty and what they want to accomplish and, in turn, their respect for us: that we know how to manage content; that we have a proficiency with primary source material and know how to expose it and act with it; that we know about scholarly publishing. Because what comes out of these projects are not finished papers—they’re snapshots of episodic work that was done by graduates and undergraduates during the course, snapshots of where they are when the course is finished. The process involves a whole new mechanism of interaction around creation and innovation, and we’re a partner. We’re not telling faculty what to do. They’re not telling us what to do. We all put our resources into the pot and stir them up and see what kind of stew we get.

Bayne: It sounds like there needs to be a little bit of improvisation when you collaborate.

Strong: There needs to be a tremendous amount of improvisation—and trust. The libraries are not always seen as trust-oriented organizations. We have a huge role to play in building up this trust factor. So as we scoped ideas for the new research library, we talked about the journey toward discovery and the collaboration toward innovation and about how the only way to make that journey is with partners on both sides.

Bayne: How do you hope this new resource will be used by students and faculty?

Strong: The Laboratory for Digital Cultural Heritage is not an enclosed space. The Digital Cultural Heritage folks have priority to use it, but for the other 70 percent of the week that they’re not using it—or 80 percent or 10 percent or whatever it’s going to be—the laboratory is available for students and other faculty to take advantage of its resources.

We also have another similar space and are looking for a partner to come into that area. Between those two spaces is the library’s own sandbox, where we will be looking at what the library ought to be doing for itself. We will be looking very specifically at library applications in technology, focusing on scholarly applications and digital scholarship applications. It is where we will engage students in helping us understand how they use technology and helping us develop applications that will work for them.

Outside of these spaces are sixteen enclosed group study rooms and twenty-three open pods that have LED screens so that students can hook up their laptops and do collaborative work. This activity does not have to be coordinated by a faculty member or by anybody else. There is also an instructional space, and as I said earlier, there’s a conferencing space.

To me, use of the new spaces is not just about the process of discovery. How can these spaces also be used in the process of sharing scholarship? Our traditional way in libraries has been to buy the finished scholarship, put it on the shelf, and serve it up. I want libraries to be much more involved in the sharing, episodically or snapshot-wise, of the scholarship that is being created as groups get together in these new library spaces.

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