The Library Space as Learning Space

It is fitting that this E-Content column is being published in the EDUCAUSE Review issue immediately following the E-Content column written by David W. Lewis.1 Much of the work I am discussing here had its starting point in a model developed by Lewis—a model that depicted a compelling vision for academic libraries over the next twenty years.2 In seeking to protect the library’s role as a vital part of scholarship, Lewis argued that a number of strategies were available to those charged with library funding and administration. Broadly, his thesis recognized that libraries would continue to be heavily used by students, though largely independent of print collections, and that librarians’ roles would become much more grounded in teaching and research enterprises, frequently outside the confines of the library building.

For this to be realized, Lewis identified a number of necessary steps. First, libraries should continue the migration toward electronic collections and leverage the resulting efficiency gains. Increasingly, unused print collections can be relocated to off-site storage for optimum storage and on-demand retrieval. This will allow the balance of library space use to be shifted from collection storage to learning spaces for use by students. This process of development, including a reconception of services offered by librarians, will ultimately allow two further developments: the closer positioning of librarians into teaching and research activities; and a broadening of the library’s curatorial role from the purchase (and licensing of) materials to the management of locally produced research outputs, data sets, and learning objects.

Many of us who work in academic and research libraries can immediately relate to the vision and actions proposed by Lewis. We spend increasingly large parts of our budgets on electronic resources, we see huge student demand for access to a variety of learning spaces (often in response to changes in teaching and assessment), we see rapid reductions in the use of print collections, and we face increasing demands for repository development to support research funders’ accessibility frameworks. What may be missing, though, is a more systematic assessment of the situation: can we be sure that our observations are part of an enduring shift in client behavior? And what can we say about the value that library services contribute to the college/university enterprise at this time of seemingly profound change?

The University of Queensland Library, a major research library in Australia, sought to explore these questions in greater detail. It thus undertook and participated in a number of studies to investigate client behavior. First, the role of the library as a learning space was explored through a series of studies conducted during 2008–2009.3 These studies looked at how the use of space is connected to research and learning activities, how space is used in association with “traditional” library services and print collections, how space relates to the balance between self-directed study in quiet spaces and group activity in active spaces, and how technology is used in all of these. One study involved 1,500 respondents who indicated how they used one of four libraries on a particular occasion. Participants were asked to keep a record during their time in the library, reporting why they had come to the library and what they had hoped to accomplish, what they actually did (where and with whom), and on exit, what they had achieved during their time in the library. Much of the survey was of a tick-box nature, although floor-plans were provided for annotation and free-text feedback and suggestions were encouraged. Elizabeth Jordan and Tanya Ziebell reported twelve key findings:

1. Most respondents visited the library to undertake individual study-related activities, and they accomplished this.
2. Respondents also visited the library to undertake social or group learning activities.
3. In all but a few instances, respondents did less of what they had intended to do.
4. In all but a few instances, respondents did more “other” things than they had intended to do.
5. Most respondents chose to work in the library because it is conveniently located and provides good study spaces.
6. All respondents put location, atmosphere, study space, and finding what they need above social reasons (e.g., group meetings for visiting the library).
7. Most respondents visited the library after they had been at home or at a class.
8. Most respondents planned to stay in the library for between thirty minutes and two hours.
9. Respondents were regular library visitors.
10. Students spent most of their time in the library using computers and quiet study spaces.
11. Students also used e-mail, the Internet, and Facebook, met and chatted with friends, ate, and borrowed books.
12. Students wanted the library to provide more computers and more quiet areas.4

What was striking was the extent to which the library was a prominent feature in students’ lives: almost 60 percent visit...
a library each day, with around half spending between thirty minutes and two hours and almost a quarter spending more than two hours in the library.

To further explore the library space used as a learning space, I jointly facilitated, with an architect, a design workshop to allow students to consider the necessary features of library learning spaces that supported three broad activities: preparing for a group assignment; working on an individual term paper; and studying for end-of-year examinations. For group work, students sought access to bookable group rooms with plasma screens and data projectors, coupled with other technology to foster collaboration. They also wanted wireless networks, extensive access to electric sockets, presentation rehearsal facilities, and recording services. For individual work, students requested enclosed sound-proof rooms with lockable facilities so that they can store computers, notes, and other materials when they need to take a brief break. When preparing for exams, students wanted similar spaces, but enhanced by break-out areas with soft furnishings, couches, coffee, and fresh air.

In summary, the consistent message from our space studies is that place is important. Students are heavy consumers of online information resources: electronic journals, databases, and e-books. But they value the library as a place—somewhere that offers an academic ambience for their work, a forum for engagement with others, and a flexible space that meets their shifting needs during the cycle of the semester.

Although our studies show an irrefutable demand for library-provided learning space, what is not clear is how best to make this space available. At many colleges and universities, campus space is at a premium and libraries are required to meet clients’ needs from a static footprint. Library staff accommodation apart, space is normally allocated to study facilities and teaching rooms and to storage for print collections. Can librarians reasonably adjust that balance by retiring legacy collections in favor of providing learning spaces, as advocated by Lewis? And what part does the library play in meeting the needs of its other core constituency: the research and faculty community?

The needs and opinions of researchers were addressed, in part, through a collaborative study conducted by Outsell Consultants on behalf of the libraries of the “Group of 8” (Australia’s eight leading research-intensive universities), with support from the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL). The focus of the study was to understand the benefits to academic research of the free provision at the point of use of information resources. In formulating a response to that broad question, the study (conducted at three of the Go8 member universities, including the University of Queensland) sought to understand how libraries and their collections are used by researchers. The survey, conducted using a web-based survey instrument, attracted responses from all broad academic disciplines. Overall, 30 percent of those surveyed were located off-campus more often than on-campus and relied on access to electronic resources to meet their needs. Journal articles were the most heavily used form of content, with 95 percent of respondents using these in electronic form. On average, respondents spent 4.5 hours per week using print resources and 11.2 hours consulting electronic resources. There was overwhelming agreement that the provision of information resources enabled researchers to access materials indispensable for research and to maintain a comprehensive overview of developments in their fields.

In general, researchers clearly relied on electronic resources. Although those in the arts and humanities made greater use of print materials than did their colleagues in other fields, they used electronic resources at a similar level as did those in the life and physical sciences. Overall, the evidence supported findings from library use statistics, client surveys, and other studies: use of information resources by researchers and faculty members was overwhelmingly electronic in nature, frequently off-campus, and immensely valuable to the users.

Although they make up only one component of evidence to support decision-making, these various studies do show that Lewis’s vision is achievable. Of course, fundamental change will prove controversial, particularly when it involves the removal of print collections from open shelves. But we know that electronic resources are vastly preferred, and we know that we can care for print collections more thoroughly in off-site, environmentally controlled warehouses than in hot and humid libraries. We can then leverage this shift to free up space and staff to more effectively deliver the spaces and services required in our colleges and universities in the future.

Notes

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