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Abstract

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Keywords

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Libraries in Transition: Creating a 24/7 Space at Emporia State University

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Abstract

Libraries are constantly changing and looking for ways to meet the needs of our users. Based on student feedback, the librarians at William Allen White Library at Emporia State University have created a learning commons that also serves as a 24/7 space users. The article covers the learning theory behind the learning commons and programming being offered.

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Libraries in Transition: Creating a 24/7 Learning Space at Emporia State University

One of the most important trends in academic librarianship is the mental shift of re-conceptualizing the very nature of library space. Many campus stakeholders no longer consider the library as their primary source of information; indeed some have questioned whether it is even a *necessary* source of information since "research" can be conducted virtually now, thanks to the information technology boom. The library can no longer be a *passive* space, a place waiting to be used. Librarians have come to the point where we need to focus less on the library's geographical role and more on its functional role: the library as an active place to work and learn. Margaret Grove, University Librarian at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, noted that their learning commons was designed specifically to create an "academic space that will promote and facilitate informal learning (i.e. the learning that takes place outside the classroom)" (2007, p.1). This new spatial concept represents an exciting new set of possibilities to serve campus communities. Kent (cited in Cunningham & Tabur 2012) observed that while people may "no longer need to go to the library to have their information needs met, they will go if a library is a 'desirable space'" (Introduction, para 2). Cunningham and Tabur (2012) noted that with the changes in information availability, students, nonetheless, "are choosing the physical library as much as ever and even in increasing numbers" as their preferred workspaces, even if they are not interacting with print collections (Introduction, para 1). This re-conceptualized space actually gives rise to one of the most significant aspects of contemporary academic librarianship: the information/learning commons. Over the last year, librarians at Emporia State University have pushed to develop a more comprehensive learning commons.

Learning and Learning Commons

The notion of the information/learning commons is in its third decade of existence. Bailey and Tierney (2008) note that the information commons "arose in several areas and proliferated through the first half of the 1990s," coinciding with the flowering of personal computing and the emergence of the internet (p. 5). Beagle (2010) noted that two of the first information commons were developed by the University of Iowa (1992) and the University of Southern California (1994), but that this become one of the dominant trends in academic libraries in the United States and Canada and has even become an important subject in "the broader arena of literature about academic innovation" in general (p. 10). Lippincott (2006) observed that information commons frequently [occupy] one floor of a library facility, generally a main service floor, which often includes or replaces the library's reference area" (p. 7.1). Though terms "information commons" and "learning commons" are often used synonymously, there are qualitative differences between the two. Bailey and Tierney noted that "the information commons is a model for information service delivery, offering students integrated access to electronic information resources, multimedia, print resources and services...[providing] students the opportunity to conduct research and write their papers at a single workstation" (p.1). Beagle (2010) calls this a "library-centric" approach (p. 16), meaning that the focus is consonant with the traditional view of a *place* where information can be accessed and processed.

The learning commons, on the other hand, "reflects a shift in learning theory from primarily *transmission* of knowledge to patrons toward a greater emphasis on *creation* of knowledge by commons staff and patrons and patrons' self-direction in learning" (Bailey & Tierney 2008, p. 2; italics in original). Beagle (2010) claimed that this model "[moves] well beyond" the information commons since libraries "[become] components (and sometimes hubs) of campus-wide initiatives to encourage teaching and learning with technology and collaboration among (or colocation with) learning support units such as academic skills and tutorial centers, writing centers, and faculty development programs" (p. 16). The learning commons model, then, represents a much more

comprehensive transformation of space, one “organized in collaboration with learning initiatives sponsored by other academic units, or aligned with learning outcomes through a cooperative process” with non-library stakeholders, thus participating on an even deeper in the strategic mission of the college or university (Beagle 2010, p. 17).

The learning commons model has developed in response to deep changes in learning and education in general. Learning is no longer seen as a primarily individual pursuit; rather, more and more educators recognize that learning is a social act. Lippincott (2010) noted that the emergence of the learning commons model has, at least partially, developed in response to the life patterns of Millennials, who “conduct their academic and social lives” very differently than previous generations, often completing “their academic work either with or around friends or classmates, make ample use of technology and digital content, and focus on their academic work late in the day and into early morning” (p. 27). One way to understand the strength of the appeal of the commons model is in light of Lev Vygotsky, Russian psychologist (1896-1934), who called a great deal of attention to the social nature of learning and development; although he worked primarily with children, his work has been used to explain many aspects of informal and group learning in many different contexts. His work challenges us to consider the context as possibly the most significant aspect of learning.

Lev Vygotsky

Key to Vygotsky’s thinking is the concept that learning proceeds from outside in via interaction rather than absorption: “...the child’s higher psychological functions...originally manifest themselves as forms of the child’s collective behavior, as a form of co-operation with other people, and it is only afterwards that they become the internal individual functions of the child himself” (Vygotsky 1934, para. 69). Vygotsky’s breakthrough was explaining how learners engaged in a common task co-create a deeper understanding of knowledge than individual effort can, that “learning is embedded within social events” and that “social interaction plays a fundamental role in the improvement of learning” (Wang 2007, p. 151). Central to Vygotsky’s learning theory is what he called the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the “distance between actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky 1997, p.33). The ZPD encompasses those skills and attributes towards which the student is progressing, but “only when the [learner] is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with peers,” after which “these processes are internalized, [becoming] part of the [student’s] independent developmental achievement” (Vygotsky 1997, p.35). Thus, learning “appears twice: first on the social level, and later, [sic] on the individual level; first *between* people...and then *inside*” the learner (Wang 2007, p.151; italics in original). To maximize the ZPD, teachers need to set up social learning situations in which students can work with other students who are slightly ahead of them. Interaction takes place via group learning activities and peer teaching/tutoring.

Learning commons are designed to encourage and enhance the social context(s) of learning. Though Vygotsky’s use of “zone” in the ZPD refers to “intellectual” space, the concept works with physical space as well. Gordon and Bordonaro (2007) observed that the ZPD “could easily play out

a learning commons,” where students can help each other clarify confusing concepts and where “[expressed] information needs” can be addressed by “a myriad of partners available for mediation, consultation, discussion and the solving of problems” (p. 2). Lippincott (2006) noted that these spaces “[create] an environment that nurtures these [social learning] activities by providing content in a variety of formats, technologies that might not be affordable to individual students, and spaces built to encourage collaboration and interaction” (p. 7.5). The 24/7 learning commons at Emporia State University was created to further encourage student learning and interaction on *their* level.

Our Experience

The William Allen White Library began construction on the learning commons which we had decided would also be our 24/7 space in the spring of 2013. We had begun discussions at least a year prior so we had a good idea of what the space would look like and how it would function but remained very flexible on the details.

As with any construction project you can expect delays and that was also the case with this project. The decision was made to renovate what was formerly the library lobby into the new learning commons. The space previously housed our access services department which consisted of two staff members and one faculty member as well as a large space for library patrons to use. The access services department was moved to the second floor where our reference desk was located and we also reconfigured that space to create a combined services desk in one location.

Also, much of the construction work was completed by university carpenters. This saved on the budget but combined our needs with those of the entire campus in regards to construction projects for the summer. Needless to say we had a very busy spring and summer and we still encountered some delays. We had initially hoped to open with the start of the fall semester but were delayed until September of 2013. The learning commons went to a 24/5 schedule beginning in October of 2013. We watched the gate counts and sought feedback from the students during the next few months. We also worked out security issues such as the swipe card system and securing the main parts of the building. The learning commons went to a 24/7 schedule in the spring of 2014.

Technology

Based on feedback from patrons thru LibQual + and other surveys that were administered prior to the learning commons being constructed we knew for the area to be successful we had to engage the patrons and give them what they wanted. What the surveys revealed was the students wanted better and more computers. In the approach to technology for this area we tried some new technologies that were not available on campus previously.

On the north side of the learning commons 16 thin client machines were installed which provided access to the new Sky Services that our information technology department was deploying. These thin clients allowed the library to save money based on what we would have paid for traditional desktops while also allowing for a smaller footprint in the learning commons. Also, to encourage collaboration 3 view stations were installed which included a more robust thin client and also a 42” monitor for easier viewing by multiple patrons.

On the south side of the learning commons we installed another 8 thin client workstations and 1 view station. We limited the technology on the south side of the learning commons so it could be available for performances and large gatherings.

In addition to these workstations other technology items were relocated into this area in preparation of the change to a 24/7 space and wanting to have as many possible resources available for patrons. These items included a scanning station and a print release station. The library in coordination with the campus information technology department had a print release station installed in the learning commons again to provide access to resources patrons are used to having available when the main library is open.

In the future plans to implement new technologies in the 24/7 space such as a 3D printer and laptop kiosk are in progress.

Security

When considering a 24/7 space a big consideration is security not only for the collection but also the library patrons. The library has been working with the Emporia State University Police to help plan our security for the 24/7 learning commons. Currently to be able to access the learning commons when the main library is closed you have to swipe your campus id to gain entrance. The university police have added more routine stops by the library to ensure safety of all users. We have looked into hiring staff to work 24/7 but this is very costly. The library is actively reviewing a security camera system to see if that is the most cost effective solution to put in place. Security is a high priority for the library and we are constantly monitoring the situation for any changes that are needed.

In regards to the collection the library staff has worked to make sure that all areas not available to patrons when the main library is closed can be secured. This involved installing a few new doors and putting locks on doors that previously did not have one.

Also, it is important to make sure patrons have access to a designated storm shelter area in case on inclement weather. The Library has provided to access to an area on the first floor that is part of our designated tornado area and also provides access to bathrooms.

Assessment

Assessing the 24/7 learning commons is a constantly evolving challenge. Initially, when the space opened we monitored the basics. We talked with all constituents from students to faculty in order to get feedback on what was working well and what was not. Also, as mentioned before we had

instead of relying solely on gate counts. A bonus is that we have also been able to share this with the university community via our Facebook page and these videos are one of the most popular items we have posted.

In the future, assessment will become more focused on learning outcomes and we will also start adding creation/ maker space items to the 24/7 learning commons.

Programming

One of the most important concepts involved with learning commons is the role of campus collaboration. To become less “library-centric,” library space must be opened up for other campus players. Beagle (2010) observed that “[properly] understood, librarians and academic computing staff cannot alone create a learning commons, as they serve but do not define institutional mission,” thus other academic units *must* become involved with shaping of the space (p. 18). Additionally, learning commons can and ought to be shaped by students themselves. Stuart (2009) pointed this aspect of learning commons in an ARL report, with many libraries “[mentioning] art, lectures, displays, and performances as being important assets...[showcasing] the intellectual outpouring of the university and [celebrating] the creative mind” (p. 14). Part of the mental shift involved with library commons, then, is the idea that library space does not just belong to the library, but to the entire campus community.

At ESU, we have worked hard to open up the library space to help it become a more community-oriented space. Initially, the commons was opened as a 24/5 space, open all day and all night Sunday through Thursday. To call attention to the opening, we hosted an opening celebration on October 28, 2013, at midnight, featuring pizza and a father and son violin duo. Through the rest of the semester, usage of the space was actually high enough that beginning in January 2014, we decided to open up the space 24/7.

Students eat pizza at the ESU learning commons opening

Drs. Jeremy and Jim Starr perform at the ESU Learning commons opening

One of the first departments we have worked with to bring into the space has been the music department. In the fall of 2013, we started talking to Dr. Jeremy Starr, Director of Orchestras and head of string studies, about ways *they* could use learning commons space. Initially, the librarians concluded that the space could be used for public rehearsals to give students experience playing in different spaces (a significant aspect of performance) and also to expose the general student body to classical music, but that eventually it could become a performance space. We extended an invitation to the music department to use the space and, thus far, it has played host to ESU Chamber Orchestra and String Quartet rehearsals (see appendix A for a copy of the flyer used to invite music

faculty to use the learning commons). In addition, a community group called Poetry + Funk has performed in the space. Poetry + Funk actually represents a broad collaboration, led by Dr. Kevin Rabas (Professor of English) along with including Andrew McHenry (a local pastor) and Tyler Sheldon and Kael Moffat (both ESU Students).

The ESU String Quartet rehearses in the learning commons

Poetry + Funk gig in the ESU learning commons

We have also used the learning commons space to host activities such as a Saudi Club culture day, game nights, and even a wedding on Valentine's Day (naturally).

The ESU Saudi Club celebrates in the learning commons

Wedding in the learning commons

In the future, we hope to create more collaborations with academic units across campus and with members of the community at large.

Conclusion

Again, this article is a celebration of the success of the 24/7 Learning Commons at Emporia State University's, William Allen White Library. A project such as this involves many people working hard as well as requiring input from library patrons. Though much has been done this is just the beginning. There are still many ideas to incorporate in the learning commons and more and different assessment needs to be started to really build the engaging learning commons we all want for our patrons.

Appendix A

This flyer was distributed to the music faculty by Dr. Jeremy Starr to invite them to use the learning commons space.

MUSIC IN THE LIBRARY

The William Allen White Library at Emporia State University is pleased to invite the ESU Music Department to schedule the Learning Commons. This space could be ideal for small ensemble performances, recitals, rehearsals, studio classes, workshops, and even jam sessions.

Drs. Jeremy and James Starr performing in the Learning Commons, October 28, 2013.

Estimated capacity is 100 people and space can be reconfigured to your needs. Can be scheduled any time of the day, though evenings may be preferred. To schedule, go to <http://emporia.libcal.com/index.php> or email Angie Brunk at abrunk@emporia.edu.

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Lev Vygotsky: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8f/Lev_Vygotsky_1896-1934.jpg

Drs. Jeremy and Jim Starr:

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