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The Research Library as
Learning Space:
New Opportunities for
Campus Development
(K. Webster)



“I love you my dear Library” or The Research Library as Learning Space – New opportunities for campus development

The quotation in the title of this paper is from a student's response to a library satisfaction survey conducted at The University of Queensland in August 2008. It was typical of the strong sense of satisfaction with, and importance of, the provision of library services in support of students and their learning, and of teachers and their teaching. What this paper sets out to do is explore the role that the Library plays in these activities, with particular reference to the sense of the Library as place.

This brief paper does not intend to provide a guide to designing an academic library, nor does it set out to provide a prescription for the creating of a learning space. There are many excellent guides to such endeavours, and readers will find much to stimulate

outcomes in an assessment model that embraced solitary learning. The essay and the examination were the products of individual achievement.

The arrival of electronic forms of scholarly information resources over the past fifteen years, coupled with changes in teaching practices and comfort with technology, have brought rapid and significant change. The challenge for libraries for providers of learning space is inextricably linked at this moment in time with the need to make hard decisions about the future of legacy collections and the securing of sufficient funds to repurpose library space to meet the expectations of teachers and students operating in an academic world very different to that seen only one generation ago.

Library generations

It is worth reflecting briefly upon a generational model of library space design which maps out the movement in the concept of the library as place over the past thirty years. This model was conceived and developed by Hamilton Wilson who writes elsewhere in this volume.

In the first generation research library, the physical space can be considered collection centric: all design was focused upon the building as a physical repository of library collections. Space was provided in which library clients could consult and work with collections, but the notable design features were very much structured to support the storage of printed materials. This is most instantly recognised by the appearance of many mid-20th century library buildings with narrow windows, designed to keep out light which might damage the collections, irrespective of the wishes of library clients (Figure 1).

The second generation library coincides with the emergence of electronic information resources in the early 1990s, and a growth in customer care and quality initiatives which promoted a stronger focus upon and engagement with clients. The arrival of computers and CD-ROMs brought a degree of technological sophistication into the Library which was often ahead of the ability of library clients. Inviting spaces were created in which librarians and clients could work together, facilitating teaching and training and supportive exploration of new forms of electronic resources.

The third generation library recognises the different forms of learning expected of students in a 21st century university and also acknowledges the different behaviours and learning styles of new generations of students. Whilst provision for “formal”, quiet study continues, it has been complemented, and occasionally supplanted, by group study facilities, open discussion spaces and social networking environments. Several third generation libraries have been developed at The University of Queensland. One, at the University's Ipswich campus, was created ab initio in a new, purpose-built facility (Figure 2). The Biological

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their thinking elsewhere in this volume. Rather, it seeks to set out a view of the changing nature of the research library and the opportunities that are presented through this evolution better to support the learning needs of today's, and tomorrow's, students.

For almost the whole of the 20th century, interactions between students, researchers, teachers, library staff and collections have taken place within the physical boundaries of the library. The constraints of the print environment necessitated the construction of libraries which served as substantial warehouses of print materials and provided a place dedicated to the quiet and private study of books and journals. Service points were constructed to provide access to library staff for support in the use of library materials and to facilitate the borrowing of items that could be taken away from the confines of the library building. The nature of university teaching required little else, for it embraced a model where students attended lectures and tutorials, but demonstrated their learning

This paper maps out a number of themes. In doing so, it gives voice to library clients, using their words as examples of the issues faced in one large research library. Inevitably, some responses will reflect local matters but there is much to suggest that what we confront at The University of Queensland has wider application.

There is evidence to show that the Library remains an important part of decision making by prospective students and forms a significant part of the student academic experience (Cain & Reynolds 2006). Studies show high levels of importance attached to the Library, with students making regular visits, many on a daily basis (UQ Library 2009). However, changes in the wider environment all point to a suggestion of change: surely the emergence of widespread availability of information in electronic form points to the end of the Library? This paper considers these trends, and offers a new future for the library as a key provider of learning space on campus.

Sciences Library, which re-opened in 2007, was designed in a wholly refurbished and extended building originally constructed in the early 1970s.

Finally, a fourth generation library can be envisaged, one in which the Library forms part of a campus-wide learning environment and which is designed predominantly upon pedagogical principles.

These changes in libraries are emblematic of a number of changes in the wider environment. These changes have both driven shifts in library design, but have also themselves been facilitated by changes in libraries and in the provision of academic information resources.

The changing environment

As foreshadowed above, the nature of pedagogy in the university has shifted. A growing emphasis has been placed upon student-centered learning, and upon group work and collaborative forms of assessment. These changes have driven a vast demand for spaces which foster and support emerging forms of learning activity. It is worth noting that this shift has not replaced, but has generally supplemented conventional forms of student learning.

Secondly, the nature of the student body has shifted, with the arrival at university of students frequently characterized as the net generation or Generation Y. These students have grown up surrounded by technology – most will have been born several years after the popularisation of personal computing and will have started school after the emergence of the Internet. They use technology to maintain contact with friends, are inquisitive and multi-tasking (Prensky 2001). The notion of sitting quietly in a Library for prolonged periods of time, reading and taking notes is as alien a concept as sitting motionless in a lecture listening and taking notes! As the environment in high schools shifts towards one which reflects the nature of today's students, expectations of the provision of learning facilities in post-compulsory education will also shift.

We cannot ignore, either, the changing nature of library use. Conventionally, the Library existed to

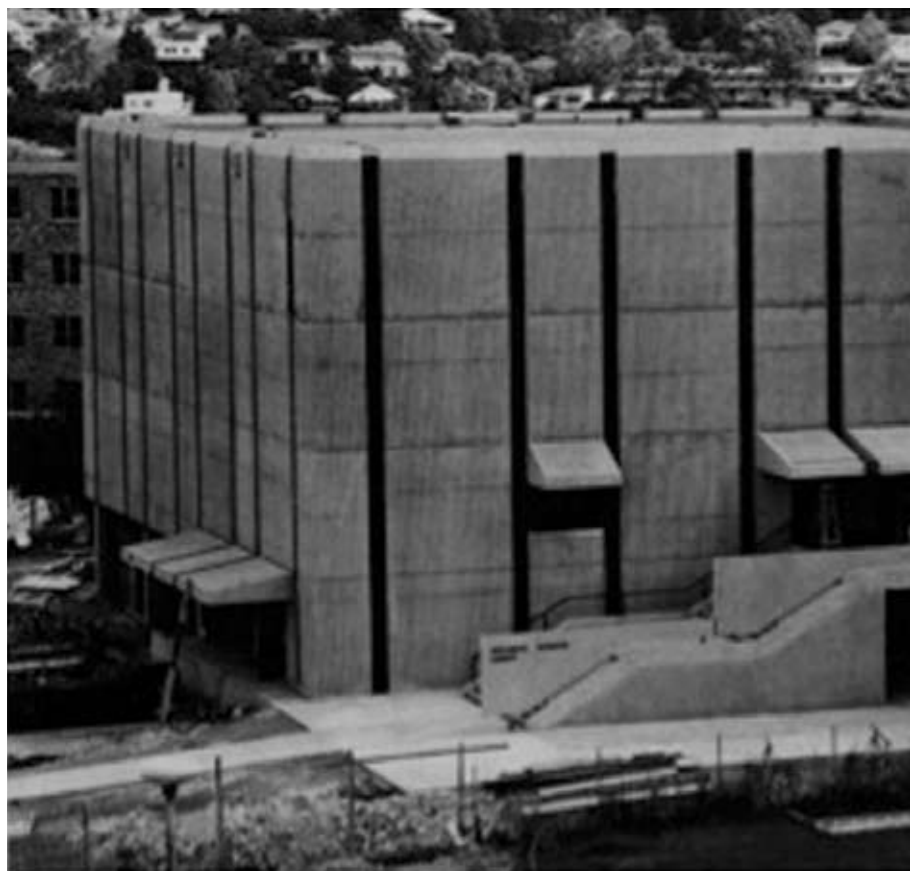


Figure 1: The original Biological Sciences Library, UQ.

house printed collections and to make them available for consultation and borrowing. This mission was enhanced by the work of reference librarians who aided clients in the use of these collections. Such activity was conventionally measured by libraries in terms of numbers of loans per annum, numbers of reference questions answered, and the numbers of visits to libraries per annum.

The University of Queensland has experienced substantial decline in many traditional library activities. Loans of books to staff and students have fallen from more than 1.1 million in 2000 to just over 700,000 in 2008. Enquiry desk transactions have fallen from around 300,000 to 100,000. These trends can be observed in research libraries around

the world and are to be expected: the availability of electronic information has overtaken the demand for print materials in many cases, and the success of information skills training and information literacy initiatives have had a positive impact upon client skill and confidence. One area of statistical growth has been the number of visits to libraries. The library has remained a popular destination, with more than 3 million visits to UQ libraries during 2008.

For many years, the library has been regarded as a core part of a university's research infrastructure. At the heart of the university, a library with extensive collections built up over time and reflecting both a breadth and depth of scholarship, is regarded as a symbol of research excellence.



Figure 3: The new Biological Sciences Library, UQ.

Whilst there are many great libraries in modest institutions, no great university is without an outstanding library. That status remains of tremendous importance, and few researchers would dispute the need for extensive collections of scholarly information and the support of experienced librarians in their scholarly endeavours, although with a strong preference for that support to be delivered in the school or laboratory rather than in the library. However, the notion of library as place in that dynamic has shifted. Academics report fewer visits to the library than was the case only a few years ago, and many predict a continued decline in years to come (RIN 2007). The importance of the library's print collections is also diminishing, with desktop delivery of electronic information seen as a fundamental requirement (British Academy 2005). Many report a reluctance to visit the library to copy a journal article held on

interaction with technology, information and their peers. On occasion, these interactions might be strengthened by the support of librarians, offering guidance on information searching and evaluation, and by learning advisers skilled in strengthening student academic skills.

Against this backdrop, is there a place for the Library? Educause identified a schema of learning spaces to match a range of learning activities and styles (Oblinger 2006). Each of these can be mapped directly to forms of space and facility offered in most modern academic libraries. The significant barrier to a wholesale repurposing of the library as a major provider of learning space is the need to manage legacy collections of increasingly unused print materials, and service points configured to support interactions and activities in rapid decline.

I would argue that the path is clear: we need to

sibility of other libraries. Through this approach, a complete print archive will be maintained onshore for preservation purposes, but with library clients having access to the electronic version of the same titles. Initiatives such as this will provide an opportunity for libraries to reduce the storage space in library buildings, and redevelop the space released to provide support for learning activities. Whilst an approach of this sort might be less straightforward for monograph collections, immediate savings through responsible management of journal collections will yield considerable opportunities. As book digitisation projects, such as that managed by Google, come to maturity over the next decade, I have little doubt that similar approaches will be adopted.

The UQ experience

The first major development of this sort at The University of Queensland was the redevelopment of the Biological Sciences Library in 2006-2007 (Figure 3). A broad aim of that modernisation was to create a range of spaces for group study and social interaction. A review of the philosophy and initial outcomes of that work was presented at the first Next Generation Learning Spaces colloquium in 2007 (Webster 2007). Post-occupancy survey showed that our aims were justified: the demand for, and satisfaction with, group study rooms, open spaces and informal seating arrangements was great. However, there was an unexpected consequence. Formal, structured, individual space was still sought. The neighbouring Law Library reported an influx of science students seeking a quiet space. Intuitively, this demand was most evident as end of semester examinations drew near.

What became apparent was the need not only for redesigned learning space, but also for space which could be repurposed during the course of the academic cycle. At the start of the academic year, students sought group space, coupled with a need for library staff support for orientation activities. As the semester unfolded, staff support was less in demand, with even greater emphasis



Figure 2: Ipswich Library Study Booths, UQ.

the library's shelves: the effort required is seen as disproportionate to the likely academic benefit (RIN 2007).

An opportunity to repurpose

All of these strands can be brought together to form a hypothesis. We see lowered patterns of demand for conventional library services and collections, and a stronger emphasis upon the provision of information in electronic form. However, we can also see a real need for a place on campus which offers a forum for student

take a long, hard look at the disposition of our collections, working collaboratively with colleagues to share the responsibility for maintaining lesser used material, much of which is available in electronic form. For example, The University of Queensland is part of an initiative of major university research libraries in Australia seeking to manage back runs of journals, electronic equivalents of which have also been purchased by those libraries. The project aims to identify a single print run of each journal title to be managed by a participating library, with each library looking after their fair share of titles. In turn, they will be able to remove from their collections those titles which are the respon-

upon space for group work and class presentation preparation space. Finally, as the end of semester approached, study space for individual essay writing and exam revision was in high demand.

Two approaches have been adopted to address this need: we are beginning to zone library space by form of learning activity. Particular branches are designated as having facilities and spaces suited to particular learning activities. And individual libraries have specific zones designated for silent study, group work or “quiet” discussion. We have also invested in furniture design, for example commissioning partitions which can be mounted onto group tables to convert them into individual study carrels (Figure 4).

The client voice

In our work, we have been particularly struck by the willingness of students and academic staff to become part of our thinking, and to contribute to our design processes. A number of studies were conducted during 2008, and Jordan and Ziebell report these in this volume. We have also adopted the international LibQUAL+ library client satisfaction survey and this has allowed us to pay particular attention to clients’ perceptions of our learning environment. A study using the LibQUAL+ approach was conducted in August 2008 and revealed considerable interest in the library as space. Opinions seemed, at the time, to be conflicting. Consider the following responses to the provision of seating and space:

- We need more individual workspaces
- Provide more group areas
- There seems to be a lot of space for individual work in comparison to group work
- More individual study spaces. Limit the group spaces
- More availability of individual and group study room
- Quiet or discussion spaces would be preferable

Time and again we see comments which show that one group of respondents want a particular approach, and another group want the complete opposite. There appears to be no obvious cohort explanation for the nature of responses: age, academic field of study, gender, country of origin appear to have little pattern. What remains clear is that our clients want more: more space, more variety and more opportunity.

One respondent offered a succinct view:

“The facilities are very good. The availability of these services is nowhere near as good.”

We need also to proceed with some sensitivity and caution. In an academic environment, it is important to ensure that whatever we do is tested against academic need and expectation. Too many innovative library designs have failed because they were seen as fads or gimmicks. This was echoed by one academic respondent to the survey:

“Please don’t allow the anti-academics amongst your management to allow our libraries to be turned into playgrounds. Playgrounds are available everywhere to those that want them. If you drive those of us who want real libraries out, where can we go? (Plus, remember: the current fashion will

pass, fly-by-night management will move on to the next fashion as always).”

The time for innovation is ripe, but we need to make haste – slowly. One final comment from a student:

“Everything in the Library is perfect – so far.”

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Figure 4: Study Desks.