LEARNING INFUSED LIBRARIES: HONEST TALK ABOUT WHAT IT REALLY TAKES TO CREATE A LEARNING COMMONS

LAURA BAKER

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, libraries have focused on a singular approach to learning. Our architecture, full of individual carrels, isolated tables, and quiet stacks, stresses learning in isolation; and the one-shot library workshop often comprises the core of our formal instruction. Increasingly we are realizing that people also learn collaboratively, frequently work in groups, and use technology almost constantly throughout the learning process. What if our libraries were set up to support and even encourage the way people really learn? What if the spaces and services were designed in such a way that learning did not happen only during the formal instruction session or in the study carrel but instead was infused throughout the whole library experience? Such a vision is the basis of a Learning Commons.

A Learning Commons is a way of integrating technology, library services, and other academic support to create a more holistic learning environment. In 2006, the library at Abilene Christian University (ACU) moved in a new direction. We partnered with technology support, the campus writing center, speaking center, faculty development support, and food services to create a Learning Commons, all within our existing building. This required changing our physical space, our service focus, our relationships with other academic entities, and our entire concept of what libraries can and should do.

CONCEPT AND METHODS

A fundamental basis of a Learning Commons is that it represents user centered design. Scott Bennett, a leader in rethinking library spaces, said that the challenge of the Learning Commons is “to conceive of it as owned by learners …” not by the librarians (2003, p.39). It is not about what librarians think users want, but what users themselves say they want based on their learning habits. We took a radical step to find out what our users wanted: we asked them.

We engaged several academic classes to study the library as their class project. Our marketing students administered surveys and conducted focus groups among our students and faculty to discover how students work and how classroom faculty teach. These surveys provided rich data about what our users needed in a learning space (Busch, Williamson, Foster, & Easter, 2005; Forehand, West, & Wright, 2005). Our architecture and interior design classes submitted proposals for how the physical space might look. By involving our users early in the design process, the library not only gained valuable insight into effective design principles but also helped the students assume early ownership and support of the project.

FROM SURVEY TO DESIGN: KEY FINDINGS

The surveys told us what users needed in a learning environment, but we had to interpret these needs into space requirements. We had to translate desired learning behaviors into architectural features. We wanted to base each design decision on conscious and deliberate pedagogical principles.

Three primary learner needs emerged from our surveys and focus groups: more computers configured for group use; a relaxed, intellectual atmosphere; and a proactive service model.

Computers and Technology

Both students and faculty expressed the need for more workstations, and these computers needed to be configured for groups, not individuals. Seventy-two percent of our students study in groups. The majority of our faculty reported making group assignments, yet nowhere on campus was there any space designed for groups to collaborate around a computer. There
was a disjuncture between how students needed to work and how our learning spaces allowed them to work. Prior to the Learning Commons, all the campus computer labs, including those in the library, were set up in rows or in single desks for individual use. Clearly, user learning styles demanded a different physical arrangement.

Our response was to add 36 additional computers (See Figures 1-2). We used a pod design to facilitate collaborative learning. Tables are arranged in a boomerang shape around a central desktop. The curve of the table is such that four or five people can sit together and easily see the same screen. Pods are equipped with data ports and power outlets for laptops. People can work adjacent to or across from each other. The table arms, in dramatic contrast to the cramped workspace in traditional computer labs, are over 4 feet long and provide plenty of room to spread out books and papers. Students have room to think, to interact, and to learn.

Figure 1: Technology enabled spaces

Figure 2: Computer pod design

Relaxed, Intellectual Atmosphere

In pre-Learning Commons surveys, 77% of our students said that atmosphere was the primary area of improvement needed in the library. Ninety-three percent of our faculty thought the library would benefit from a more “Barnes & Noble” type ambience. Users cited harsh lighting, uncomfortable chairs, mismatched furniture, and an overall oppressive atmosphere. They came only when they had to and stayed only as long as absolutely necessary.

We began to realize that interior design plays a larger role than just “eye candy”. Décor can actually affect learning. In order for space to work, it needs to make people feel comfortable enough to want to be there. A coordinated color scheme, flexible lighting, specially designed workstations, and inspiring student and faculty art now transform the library, welcoming students and inviting them to make the space their own (Figure 3). A café encourages people to be comfortable in the building, to spend time here, and to engage in conversation and idea exchange. Some floors are quiet zones, and students can choose a quiet corner by themselves (Figure 4) or a more active learning environment according to their learning preference. By surrounding people with images of creativity and inspiration and by allowing them to see people engaged in productive work, we communicate the types of behaviors we expect to happen in the library. We create an aesthetically pleasing space where people are primed and equipped for learning.

Figure 3: Welcoming interior design

Figure 4: Attractive quiet spaces
Proactive Service Model

Integral to a Learning Commons is having assistance readily available and integrated into the whole space. We changed our service model to promote a closer relationship between the librarian and the student. This change is most clearly demonstrated by comparing our old reference desk (Figure 5) with our new desk (Figure 6).

How a service desk is arranged communicates the type of interaction that will occur there. Our old desk is typical of a traditional library. It is the “fortress model” where the librarian sits on one side, the patron stands on the other, and nobody crosses the barrier. It reinforces a vertical hierarchy between those who approach it.

Contrast this with our new desk. It is smaller and more approachable. It is located in the middle of the activity so that patrons do not feel exposed if they ask for help. The librarian can easily get up and go to someone else.

The change producing the most impact, however, was the most inexpensive to implement. We placed a chair for the patron on the same side of the desk as the librarian. We now invite patrons to sit next to us and to partner with us in looking for information. This completely changes the librarian-student relationship. It creates a rapport that transforms the encounter from a mere reference transaction into a learning exchange. It was a powerful lesson to us in how simple furniture arrangement influences the relationships that make or break a learning opportunity.

Results

In the year since the ACU Learning Commons opened, our gatecount went up by 34% and research assistance increased by 15%. The technology, speaking, and writing centers show a similar sustained increase in assistance provided. The rise in research and academic support assistance is especially significant because it indicates what users are doing in the library. They are not simply web surfing or drinking coffee; they are using the space to further their own learning.

We surveyed users about their likes and dislikes of the Learning Commons. The results are summarized in Figures 7 and 8. Most of the negative comments about computers and the building reflect the need to incorporate Learning Commons features throughout the rest of the library, something we plan to do in the future. Overall, most impressions are positive. Many people simply gave an overall positive response (i.e., “Love it”); others were more specific about their likes.
classroom, and instructional sessions with a librarian -- are more likely to report deeper levels of learning (Kuh, 2001). To the extent that the Learning Commons encourages these activities, it encourages learning.

Observational data confirm that students are using the library in many of the ways mentioned above. We regularly see groups talking and working together. Collaboration happens naturally and effortlessly now that the space and the atmosphere promote it. Many classroom faculty hold office hours in the Learning Commons. Students see faculty engaged in research, and faculty see how students interact with their assignments. Through this gathering, the Learning Commons creates opportunities to strengthen the professor-student relationship.

Conversation is a prominent part of learning. Some studies estimate that informal learning accounts for over 75% of knowledge in today’s organizations (Connor, 2005). To further opportunities for discussion and reflection, the Learning Commons has hosted lectureship events, visiting authors, and guest speakers. Collaborative spaces, private conversation nooks, and brighter interior design enable discourse. Several small classes have elected to meet in the library because of the conversation the space enabled, preferring a group dynamic the Commons inspires over the atmosphere in their regular classroom.

This convergence of faculty, staff, and students is something new for ACU. We did not see these things happening before in the Library. Now they are becoming more common.

PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A Learning Commons is not merely a building renovation. It is a different way of thinking about what we do as librarians. Many of our changes involved transformations in thinking that we did not anticipate. It is important to be aware of these issues and to reflect honestly with ourselves about what they mean before considering a Learning Commons model.

User relationships

What type of user relationships does the library want to have? A Learning Commons stresses a more horizontal model where hierarchical lines are blurred and people regularly partner with each other. While this goal sounds good initially, not every staff member will want it. Some will not be comfortable inviting users to sit next to them on their side of the desk. Establishing rapport requires a certain amount of emotional energy and a greater level of personal involvement. Not everyone is willing to give that, and yet this enhanced patron-librarian-faculty relationship is critical to the success of the commons. It behooves the library to be honest about whether it wants to invest in such a relationship.

Partnering with Other Groups

Creating a Learning Commons means working intimately with other academic support groups, such as information technology, food service, writing tutors, etc. These groups will not have the same culture as that of the library. They will have different jargon, different views of what constitutes good customer service, and different priorities. Nevertheless, everyone must work together toward creating a unified, seamless help system. Expect to experience culture clash. Expect to make compromises, to be open to new ideas, and to affirm which core values will be upheld.

Bringing additional support groups into the library means creating space for them. This means that something or someone has to give up space. The library may have to redistribute the stacks to other floors, making those areas more crowded than usual. The reference collection may have to shrink. Some people may have smaller offices or have to share an office. Those who stand to gain from the new space will be excited; those who have to give up something may be less enthusiastic. Be prepared for both reactions. Talk openly about plans, and share the whole picture of what the library is trying to create. Each person must ask himself or herself if the whole vision is compelling enough to make certain sacrifices.

A library that says “yes”

Many patrons define the library by what they are not allowed to do. To them, the library is the place where they cannot talk, cannot use cell phones, cannot use Google, or cannot check out certain books. We reinforce the “no” messages through our signage, our locked-down computers, our atmosphere, and our procedures that cause more inconvenience than empowerment. What would happen if we became a place that said “yes” to our patrons? Yes, you can check your email. Yes, you can easily access the computer software you need to do your work. Yes, you can use your electronic devices. Yes, you are free to think and to explore and to learn about any idea which you are curious to know.

As library employees, it is easy to slip into a mindset of imposing limitations. Sometimes we do this out of tradition or lack of trust in others. What do the architectural spaces and the staff attitudes say about the library? Is the library a place that implies restrictions, or does it suggest limitless possibilities to those within its walls? The prudent library will continually re-examine itself, testing the boundaries of what it can become to its community.

REFERENCES


