Academic libraries as learning spaces in Japan: Toward the development of learning commons

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Abstract   Since the beginning of the 1990s, new types of learning spaces at academic libraries have emerged mainly in North America. They are called "information commons" or "learning commons." They provide various kinds of services, facilities, and materials in one location to support students' learning. The idea of learning commons has been introduced to colleges and universities in Japan as well. The purpose of this study is to examine the present condition of learning spaces in university libraries in Japan. A questionnaire was sent to 755 main or central libraries at colleges and universities. The response rate was 69.4%. The results of the survey are as follows: (a) simple collaborative learning spaces with desk/desks and chairs have become modestly widespread, while advanced spaces with equipment for information and communication technology, such as computers or projectors, are not common; (b) many libraries provide computer clusters; and (c) cafés and/or beverage vending machines in libraries are still few in number. The survey also reveals that learning commons in Japan are in the early stage of development. Various types of learning spaces are recognized as learning commons. They range from a group learning room with Wi-Fi access to an entire learning commons, where several kinds of facilities, services, and information resources to support students' learning in one location are provided. This diversification may be based on the confusion caused by the rapid introduction of learning commons in Japan. Many learning spaces may rebuild their own services in the near future because of their students' needs.
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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, new types of learning spaces at academic libraries have emerged mainly in North America. They are called "information commons" or "learning commons." They provide various kinds of services, facilities, and learning resources to support students' learning in one location. The idea of learning commons has been introduced to colleges and universities in Japan as well.

Transformation of learning spaces: from information commons to learning commons

Beagle pointed out that an information commons, which was initially referred to as a learning commons, originated

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at Jackson Community College in Jackson, Michigan between 1987 and 1988 (Beagle, 2006). He defined an information commons as "a cluster of network access points and associated IT tools situated in the context of physical, digital, human, and social resources organized in support of learning" (Beagle, 2006). This means not only a virtual environment but also a physical environment for information technology and technical support intended to support learning (Beagle, 1999). This appears to be similar to the definition of a learning commons. When the actual commons are observed, it is often difficult to find a difference between an information commons and a learning commons.

Recently, learning commons have been considered as a development-type of information commons. For example, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) said that the transformation of information commons to learning commons reflects a new paradigm in undergraduate education; a shift in learning theory from the transmission of knowledge to the creation of knowledge and self-direction in learning (ACRL, 2005). Many researchers and librarians agree with this shift.

Three factors could be attributed to the creation of learning spaces. First, the rapid development and improvement of information and communication technologies have caused an increase in digitized and networked information and a diversification of information media. This has led to new types of learning spaces, in which learning resources with every kind of media can be provided effectively.

Second, the growth of the number of "Net Generation college students" could be a factor. Prensky categorizes today's students as "digital natives" as they are the first generation to grow up with digital technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, cell phones, and all of the other toys and tools of the digital age. Prensky said that digital native methodologies for all subjects at all levels should be included (Prensky, 2001). For example, "Net Generation college students," who are also called digital natives, have a characteristic learning style. They favor intuitive visual communications and learn better through discovery than through being taught. Their style requires high-quality visual technologies and collaborative working spaces.

Third, the emergence of a constructivist education theory could be considered a factor contributing to the creation of learning spaces. It brings a demand for learning spaces for group studies and team-based projects. A paradigm shift of college education occurred in North America, from a traditional teaching method, in which lecturers impart knowledge to students, to a new one such as active learning, in which students participate actively in the class to gain knowledge. An example of active learning is cooperative group learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991).

In Japan, in addition to these factors, there is a crisis in higher education. A national government report, *Images of Colleges and Universities in the 21st Century, and Reformation Policy in the Future (21seiki no Daigakuzo to Kongo no Kaikaku Hosaku ni tsuite)*, was published by the Council of Colleges and Universities (Daigaku Shingikai) in 1998. This report emphasizes the necessity of building the accreditation system and recommends developing learning spaces outside classrooms to improve learning at colleges and universities. Moreover, due to a change in the students' learning style because of the introduction of an education-with-latitude policy in elementary and secondary schools, a diversification in the academic performances of college students should be noted. The latter is based on a change in the university entrance examination system and the universal nature of higher education in Japan.

The purpose of this study is to examine the current condition of learning spaces in college and university libraries in Japan. For instance, Ochanomizu University Library published several articles about the aspects and concept of its learning commons, and the Tokyo Woman's Christian University Library started a new program titled "My life, My library," which was a learning and a user-focused library space. However, most of them only paid attention to their own cases. At present, there is neither a nationwide survey on learning commons nor a holistic approach to the Japanese way of learning commons. To develop learning commons further, it is important to understand and analyze the present situation of learning spaces at university libraries in Japan.

Research method

The authors conducted a nationwide survey of learning spaces at university libraries to learn the following: (a) the facilities, materials, and services for learning support that they currently provide; (b) the existing condition for a learning commons; and (c) the facilities, materials, and services for learning support considered necessary.

At the end of July in 2010, a questionnaire was sent to the directors of 755 main or central libraries at colleges and universities (86 national university libraries, 77 public university libraries, 592 private university libraries). Seven hundred and forty-seven libraries listed in *Statistics on Libraries in Japan 2009 (Nihon no Toshokan: Tokei to Meibo 2009)*, 289pp were added to some libraries listed in *A List of Universities in Japan 2009 (Zenkoku Daigaku Ichiran 2009)*, 930pp.

The reply deadline was August 31, 2010, and reminders were sent in the Fall of 2010. Five hundred and twenty-four libraries responded (75 national university libraries, 65 public university libraries, and 384 private university libraries) at a response rate of 69.4%. In addition to the survey, the authors also interviewed librarians and academic staff members involved with the learning commons in some university libraries Table 1.

Findings

Facilities, materials, and services for learning support

Supporting learning plays an important role for today's university library and many university libraries provide the resources to support students' learning. Over 80% of them provide "student-requested books" (95.9%, 494 libraries), "faculty-recommended books" (89.9%, 463 libraries), and "books in the syllabi" (81.6%, 420 libraries), whereas only