Library Space Assessment: User Learning Behaviors in the Library

Susan E. Montgomery *

Olin Library, Rollins College, 1000 Holt Avenue, Winter Park, FL 32789, USA

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ABSTRACT

As an essential department at a higher education institution and an informal learning space, little is known about how academic libraries contribute to student learning on campus. The Olin Library sought to learn the role of library space in our users' learning. We surveyed users about their learning behaviors in a specific space prior to a scheduled renovation and then in the same space after. We wanted to determine how the renovation changed users' perceptions of their learning behaviors in that space.

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As an essential department at a higher education institution and an informal learning space, little is known about how academic libraries contribute to student learning on campus. At the Olin Library we sought to learn about the role of library space in our students' learning. A scheduled renovation of the main floor of the library provided us the opportunity to determine how the change in space impacts our students' perceptions of their learning in that space. We surveyed our users in the space prior to the renovation and then surveyed them in the same space following the renovation. The survey focused on learning styles and how the space facilitated those different behaviors. At the Olin Library, we wanted to determine how a renovation of a library space changed users' learning behaviors in that space.

The connection between libraries and learning has always been strong. Historically, the library's content provided on its shelves has been the center of the learning in the library. Users entered the library building to consult print books, journals, and related materials to supplement their classroom learning. Librarians assisted users to find information helping to stimulate the learning process. With the advent of electronic access to books, journal articles and the like, libraries have experienced a decline in their gate counts and circulation statistics. Users can now access library content and contact librarians electronically and they are often outside the library building when they do.

The change in information access has progressed into a discussion of the purpose of a library building. Librarians have taken steps to redesign or create new spaces in response to the changes in information format and the changing needs of their users. The importance of library space is shifting from the content on our shelves to how students use and learn in our space. The library is considered an "informal learning space" and

unlike the classroom, which is a formal learning space, libraries do not have a prescribed course or class dictating the learning. Other informal learning spaces include dorm rooms, patios, lounge areas or even hallways. In these spaces, students determine their learning needs and goals and can be intentional about their learning (Bennett, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Library space has entered a new design phase that contributes to the informal learning environment our users seek in our building. Scott Bennett refers to the current phase of library design as "learner centered." Library space investments completed during the 1990s cited the "changing character of student study space needs" as the 2nd highest project motivator (Bennett, 2003). Our users' needs have become a center of library space planning. Foster and Gibbon's extensive research of undergraduate students at the University of Rochester enabled them to create a "student-centered library" (2007). Creating such a space requires understanding how students learn with the goal of facilitating their learning in the space they choose. Danuta Nitecki states in her article that one of the main functions that define library space is the role of facilitator. In that role, the library provides spaces to "foster self-directed learning and the creation of new knowledge" (Nitecki, 2011). Informal learning spaces, like libraries, give students the opportunity to "linger, meet, and talk informally out of class" (Acker & Miller, 2005). The goal of these spaces is to enhance user learning and encourage social learning.

Social learning emphasizes students as active learners. They are contributors to the discussion rather than merely absorbing content. Malcolm Brown writes that higher education needs to apply constructivist learning theory when teaching to the current generation of students, known as the NetGen (Brown, 2005). He emphasizes three characteristics of constructivist theory and its relation to learning: learning is contextual and

* Tel.: +1 407 646 2295.
  E-mail address: smontgomery@rollins.edu.

recognizes the student understanding; it is active and engages students in the learning activities; it is social and utilizes discussion and conversation between students and between students and faculty (Brown, 2005). In social learning, there is an interdependence of personal and environmental influence in which a person's behavior determines which "environmental influences will come into play" while the external influences also determine the student's behavior (Bandura, 1977). Depending on the needs of the learner, a specific space will be sought to satisfy the need (Bligh & Pearshouse, 2011). Thus, students seek out environments that satisfy their social learning needs. Libraries can satisfy that need by providing informal learning spaces where social learning is encouraged.

Scholars widely discuss the library as a place for social learning. Libraries provide spaces that inspire students to learn from each other in addition to learning from our content. In these environments, open conversation and collaborative learning are encouraged. Learning centered research identifies learning as a social experience where individuals can interact and engage in dialogue (Oblinger, 2004). The library has evolved into a space where active learning occurs, facilitating student interaction with each other and with faculty in an environment outside the classroom (Hunley & Schaller, 2009). Libraries can provide spaces that enrich the social learning needs of our students.

Determining the effectiveness of space on student learning is a challenge. Researchers have succeeded in assessing learning in formal learning environments and their impact on student learning. Active learning classrooms (ALCs) substantially enhance student learning experiences and outcomes when compared to a traditional classroom design (Brooks, 2010; Whiteside, Brooks, & Walker, 2010). Nitecki explains that because learning is "a highly individualized change in personal knowledge," it is "difficult to separate influences of space from other variables such as prior experience, personal distractions or stress, or styles of learning" (Nitecki, 2011). Although assessing student learning in an informal learning space like a library may be difficult, it is important. Informal learning space assessment has been accomplished through qualitative methods such as photo surveys, mapping diaries, focus groups, and interviews (Foster & Gibbons, 2007; Lawrence & Weber, 2012; Matthews, Andrews, & Adams, 2011; Whiteside et al., 2010). Results from these methods help inform library design as well as help librarians evaluate the space and its usage. Library space renovation has relied on use and visitation statistics to determine users' acceptance and the success of the renovation (Shill & Tonner, 2004; Starkweather & Marks, 2005). Hunter and Shaller's multi-year assessment project examined the relationship between learning space, academic programs and learning. They found that learning spaces can encourage or constrain behavior and determined that students will use any space for learning activities if the space is so designed appropriately (2009).

Social learning relies on users' conversing and learning from each other in a space. Spaces where users can meet and talk comfortably are more apparent in libraries. The library can be "a place to be with other people in a learning/cultural environment" (Demas, 2005). Such areas draw in users providing them the opportunity to discuss their learning and develop a sense of belonging. Libraries have also made their spaces more comfortable in order to enhance their users' social learning. Students are more engaged in their learning in spaces where social learning is encouraged (Matthews et al., 2011). The importance of assessing student learning in informal spaces like libraries provides valuable insight about how our students perceive the space in their learning. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion of library space assessment serving as a case study of assessing user learning behavior in a renovated library space.

CONTEXT

The Olin Library is the only library at Rollins College—a small private college in Winter Park, FL. It serves approximately 3000 students that are comprised of a traditional undergraduate population, an evening and weekend undergraduate and graduate non-traditional student population and a small graduate business school. The main floor of the library houses a small café, an IT help desk, several computer areas as well as circulation and reference desks, librarians' offices, and a print reference collection. Open conversation and dialogue is encouraged and students gather in various areas to converse. Prior to the renovation, a large print reference collection dominated a substantial portion of the floor limiting the space available for our users. The popular café was an unappealing assortment of refrigerated carts and a cashier stand. In addition, the librarians' offices were hidden from view.

Like other academic libraries, the Olin Library had succeeded in enhancing its electronic collection over the past few years in order to facilitate users' access to our content. We saw decreases in our building gate counts and circulation numbers. The library had been adopting content in new formats, but the main floor had languished in a 1980s décor that did not enhance the learning environment on campus. Ironically, our college established the "Conference Plan" style of instruction in 1927 which promoted conversation as an ideal instruction method. This style encouraged faculty members to engage in students in a "conversational-style class structure" rather than a lecture format (Rollins College, 2012). The president of the college at that time wanted to "humanize education" and minimize the barriers between instructor and student (Stockbridge, 1938). Furthermore, learning extended outside the classroom onto campus grounds where students engaged in conversations with each other and their professors (Stockbridge, 1938). As an active learning place where students and faculty could meet and exchange ideas, we desired to create a more inviting learning space in the library to complement the classroom environment on campus, to reflect the college's tradition of conversation, and to better meet the learning needs of our users.

METHODS

The Olin Library renovated 80% of the main floor over the summer of 2012. In preparation, we conducted ethnographic surveys of the space including observations and student focus groups giving us information about our users' and their space needs (Montgomery, 2011). As a supplement to those studies, we wanted to ask students how they learned in the particular space on the floor and how that space met those needs. We decided to conduct a 14-question survey asking users about their learning behaviors in the planned renovated space (see Appendix A). The survey also included demographic questions about the user such as academic year, enrollment status, academic major and living situation (off-campus or on-campus) and three open-ended questions about the space they were in. We secured IRB approval and modeled our survey on questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement. We administered the survey during the spring semester of 2012 and then repeated it in spring 2013. We chose to administer the survey during weeks that did not coincide with mid-terms, spring break, or finals. Essentially, these were typical weeks during the semester on our campus. Our research team consisted of one librarian and two library staff members.

Initially we scheduled the survey to be administered at 2:00 pm, 6:00 pm and 10:00 pm from Monday through Thursday. We kept a log of surveys completed at each time along with concerns or questions the researcher had about conducting the survey. Users had the option of completing a paper survey, using an I Pad or scanning a QR code with their smartphone. We only wanted users to complete the survey once. After the first week, many people refused to do the survey because they had already completed it. Therefore we expanded the time slots for conducting the survey, which allowed us to increase the number of responses.

RESULTS

After gathering the surveys from both semesters, we compared the data from the first 240 completed surveys. These surveys included a