July 2009

Academic Libraries as Learning Spaces: Library Effectiveness and the User Experience

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Academic libraries as learning spaces: Library effectiveness and the user experience
by Charles Forrest

Academic libraries are reinventing themselves as spaces for active learning. The ongoing transformation of the library's role requires a theory/practice approach that aims to reshape learning spaces in the library in a larger campus context of student learning.

When the patron's mode of interaction with the library was the transaction, the library's focus was on information goods, and its goal was control; its primary role was that of gatekeeper, and its success was measured in terms of investments or inputs (e.g., expenditures, total staff, volume count). With the reconceptualization of the patron as customer, the focus became service, and the library's goal to connect; its primary role became that of assistant, its success measured in terms of activities or outputs (e.g., circulation transactions, reference questions answered, classes taught and students present).

With the next rethinking of the customer as the guest, the mode becomes the experience; the library's goal becomes collaboration, its primary role that of partner, and its success measured by impacts or outcomes (e.g., fostering student learning success, supporting faculty productivity, enhancing institutional reputation). After the library deploys its resources in support of its activities, the question becomes one of results: What difference has it made? Transactions are useful and service is helpful, but experiences are memorable and potentially transformative.

This paper examines the increasing attention paid to the user's experience of the library, introduces a model to describe the evolution of the library/customer relationship and suggests some key metrics for measuring academic library effectiveness focused on user behaviors and responses to library as place.

Introduction

Academic libraries are working hard to reinvent themselves as learning spaces for 21st century students and faculty. Cognitive research has informed and shaped emerging pedagogies intended to foster problem-based, experiential, active learning. Our campuses and parent institutions are working hard to understand and respond to the implications of these new relationships among learners, learning experiences and learning spaces.

While most academic libraries are becoming more willing to characterize their communities of users as "customers," some are preparing to take another page from business in an attempt to transform themselves from service providers to collaborative partners in learning and research, in large part by embracing and deploying powerful technologies for distribution, access and manipulation of massive quantities of digital information in a variety of formats — print, image and sound. While the virtual library is accessible from the "anywhere" of the Internet, the user experience grounded in the library as place suggests the need to examine the value-added proposition of the role of the library in the life of the intellectual community that is the basis for the modern residential campus.

The experience economy

In *The Experience Economy*, Pine and Gilmore propose a model for understanding the transition they see underway from a goods and services economy to an experience economy. In the information world, data is a commodity, the raw material of research and learning. Compiling and analyzing the raw material of data, information aggregators package and deliver information goods, "tangible items sold to largely anonymous customers who buy them off the shelf, from the lot, out of the catalog, and so on."[1] Libraries select and acquire these information

goods (books, journals, databases, other resources) as the foundation for programs of services, intangible activities customized to the individual request of known clients; services employ an estimated 80 percent of the work force.[2] But the dominance of services in the modern economy leads to their commoditization; the Internet is the greatest force for commoditization for both goods and services. Automation promotes disintermediation; the end user is increasingly able to go "straight to the source" of information, decreasing reliance on intermediaries such as libraries.[3] Will the end result be to take libraries completely out of the equation? What value do libraries add?

Pine and Gilmore suggest that services can be differentiated based on the quality of the customer experience. The focus on the customer experience occurs whenever a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage an individual. While commodities are fungible (easily interchangeable), goods tangible, and services intangible, experiences are memorable.[4] The following table summarizes this transformation of the customer relationship in libraries:

Customer library

CUSTOMER		LIBRARY		Success measured by
Mode	*Role*	*Mode*	*Role*	
Transaction	Patron	Control	Gatekeeper	Inputs
Service	Customer	Connect	Assistant	Outputs
Experience	Guest	Collaborate	Partner	Outcomes

When the patron's mode of interaction with the library was the transaction, the library's goal was control, and its primary role was that of gatekeeper, with the aim of exercising effective stewardship over limited, shared resources. With information packaged and deployed in print-on-paper physical containers (books and journals), the library worked to organize and manage scarce physical resources, focusing on policies and rules governing access and use; the patron borrowed and the library loaned. The library's success was measured in terms of its investments in the resources it made available, the inputs in the information transaction (e.g., expenditures, total staff, volume count, number of subscriptions). With the evolution of the library/user relationship from patron to customer, the primary mode of interaction became service. The library's goal was the provision of customer assistance,

connecting the prepared user with the appropriate source of information or set of resources.

The library's success was measured not in terms of what it has (inputs) but of what it does, the activities it supports, its outputs (e.g., circulation transactions, reference questions answered, classes taught and students present). With the transition to the experience economy, the library's inputs and outputs, its resources and services, are used to set the stage for the customer experience. When the library customer is seen as a guest (in the all-inclusive resort sense, rather than the hotel/motel or restaurant sense), the library's efforts expand to include all the factors that contribute to the quality of the total user experience. Library staff become collaborative partners, setting the stage and attending to the library's guests on a number of levels. The library's success is measured not by what it has or what it does, but what happens as a result of those activities and encounters, the impacts or outcomes (e.g., fostering student learning success, supporting faculty productivity, enhancing institutional reputation). After the library deploys its resources in support of its activities, the question becomes one of results: What difference has it made? Transactions are useful, service is helpful, but experience is memorable — and potentially transformative.

The experience library
The need to pay more attention to all the factors that shape the user experience has drawn a variety of responses from academic libraries. The Library and Information Center at Georgia Tech in Atlanta counts a "user experience librarian" among its information services staff. The McCain Library at Agnes Scott College in Decatur and the Miami University Libraries in Oxford, Ohio, have recruited for such positions with this focus.[5] But what if an entire library committed itself to the "user experience"?

Among the preconference offerings at the 2008 annual conference of the American Library Association in Anaheim, Calif., the LLAMA/Buildings and Equipment Section/Architecture for Public Libraries Committee offered an all-day tour of area libraries including the 6-year-old Cerritos Public Library, billed as the nation's first experience library. Library project planners at Cerritos spoke of their intention and inspiration: "The new Cerritos Library is the culmination of a complete re-examination of library services, collections and staffing. Inspired in part by the book, *The Experience Economy* (B. Joseph Pine et al., Harvard Business School Press, 1999), a planning team of city elected officials and library staff, architects, artists,

designers, contractors and consultants redesigned every aspect of the library with the goal of enhancing the user experience."[6] Pine and Gilmore recognize the Disney corporation's lead in emphasizing the customer experience in the entertainment industry; the Cerritos Library takes a page from Disney by referring to its community of library users as "guests." So what awaits Cerritos Library's guests in their new experience library?

The library's striking and strongly branded main entrance leads to "Main Street," complete with (faux) palm trees; Main Street serves as the central access path on the entry level. A 15,000-gallon, two-sided saltwater aquarium immediately on the left anchors the entrance to the children's area. Inside, beyond a life-size replica of Tyrannosaurus rex, children find an artificial baobab tree, the largest ever fabricated by the company that supplies the Rain Forest Cafe, enhanced with recorded sounds of insects and birds. Further down Main Street, the entrance to the young adult area is inspired by art deco-era ocean liners, while adult reference and reading areas offer Craftsman-style furnishings and finishes. A traditional reading room includes a fireplace featuring the projected image of flames accompanied by a recorded soundtrack of logs hissing and crackling on the imaginary hearth. Ascending by escalator from Main Street to the second floor, library guests "enter the 21st century." A technology theater features open access computers ranged dramatically in tiers. A comfortable, Chinese-themed reading area offers access to a variety of collections. On the third level, guests find a technology classroom, a handsomely appointed board room and a large multifunction room that opens onto a rooftop plaza. The Cerritos Library offers a series of dramatic spaces, each with a strong individual character, each designed and fabricated to evoke a particular feeling or response, to offer a specifically tailored experience. The library is popular and much-used; Cerritos' guests visit regularly and frequently to linger and enjoy this varied and interesting facility.

Architecture is strongly influenced by place: climate, style and lifestyle. Its location in Southern California along with its proximity to Anaheim and Disneyland offer context and inspiration for the Cerritos Library's design and service innovations. What can academic libraries learn from this focused, conscious and bold approach to designing unique and compelling spaces in support of the user experience? More and more academic libraries are developing new types of spaces that afford users characteristic experiences beyond the traditional library coffee shops, technology-equipped group studies, flexible

collaborative classrooms, learning commons. But most academic libraries are not well-positioned to aggressively incorporate so many retail-inspired features into their facilities. The academic library must necessarily innovate within a tradition thoroughly grounded in a specific and enduring campus history and culture. So what can academic libraries learn from their public library colleagues, as they take inspiration from the commercial and retail sector? As academic librarians work to respond to changes in the scholarly and learning environment and strive to remain not only relevant but central to the core mission of teaching, research and service, how can we know if we're successful? And perhaps more importantly, how can we tell if we're making a difference?

Measuring success
Academic libraries count; we have counted for many years and will in all likelihood continue to count in the future. The ARL Statistics is an annual data series that describes the collections, expenditures, staffing and service activities for the more than 120 member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries. The whole data series from 1908 to the present represents the oldest and most comprehensive continuing library statistical series in North America.[7] For most of its history, the ARL Statistics and Measurement program has reported data on library inputs, such as total volumes in collection, volumes added, serials received, number of staff, and expenditures in broad categories. In response to a call for more meaningful and relevant measures of library activity, in the mid-1990s ARL added a handful of output measures to its annual survey, including number of reference transactions and number of classes taught.[8]

More recently, in response to increased demands for institutional accountability, research libraries are being challenged to provide measures that document their contributions to teaching, research, scholarship and community service. ARL's Statistics & Measurement program is supporting member efforts to develop new models for measurement that address issues of service quality, electronic resource usage, and outcomes assessment. In 1999, the ARL membership endorsed the "New Measures Initiative," aimed in part to develop tools for comprehensive collection, compilation and reporting of outcome measures, including surveys of user satisfaction and measures of service effectiveness.[9] One of the first surveys to emerge from this effort was the LibQUAL+(TM) initiative.[10]

These new initiatives aim to document the library's contributions to institutional mission in large part by

asking the library's users what they think about the quality and accessibility of information resources, the friendliness and helpfulness of staff and the comfort and functional effectiveness of library as place. Local surveys, focus groups and other sociological and anthropological research protocols bring the authentic voice and observed behavior of the user to the process of designing new types of library spaces. These emergent methodologies for assessing the usefulness and effectiveness of those new spaces are based not solely on traditional measures of investment (inputs) and activity (outputs) but on the library's influence on enhanced learning and quality research (outcomes).[11]

In the broad area of inputs, widely available guidelines ask about the adequacy of space to the intended purpose: Is there enough shelving to house the collection at efficient and effective working density? Are there enough group studies proportionate to the size and pedagogical needs of the student body? In the area of outputs, efforts build on basic activity measures: Is the library used? Are gate counts and occupancy rates commensurate with expectations and comparable to peers? Is seating generally adequate, and especially during peak demand periods around midterms and finals?

These investments and activities, these inputs and outputs, are tactical and short-term, observable on regular cycles (quarterly, semester to semester, annually), familiar and relatively easy to measure. Outcomes and impacts, on the other hand, are strategic and long-term, are often only measurable over several annual cycles and are more difficult to define and measure validly and reliably. But critical to accountability is the ability to answer the question: When you add up the investment and review all the activity, what difference did it make?

The customer survey is the cornerstone of outcomes assessment, asking users themselves about their satisfaction with library resources, services, staff and facilities. Student pre- and post-testing can begin to demonstrate the positive value of library instruction and library use. Do students self-report a positive value for certain types of library spaces? Is it possible to demonstrate a correlation between certain types of facilities designed for student group work and the quality of student collaborative projects? Does the library contribute to developing a sense of academic community? What's the connection between student perceptions of the library as a welcoming and inviting facility and their self-reported satisfaction with library staff and services? Are users staying away from the library, perhaps going elsewhere, preferring other on-campus or off-campus spaces — and if so, why? The answers to such questions can inform strategic planning, helping to frame initiatives whose implementation period can be measured in years.

Conclusion

The information marketplace has become more competitive in recent years, with academic libraries no longer holding a clear monopoly. As we struggle to understand our new roles and responsibilities among our communities of users, we can find inspiration and value in the best practices and innovations in the commercial and retail sectors, especially those features adopted by our colleagues in public libraries. At one time or another, we have all been customers and can rethink our approach to designing services and facilities based on a deeper and more nuanced understanding of that shared customer experience. If we can frame experiences for our students, faculty and visitors — our guests — that linger in their memory long after they have left our libraries and our campuses, we will continue to remain central to the academic enterprise. Delivering experiences that produce lifelong memories that continue to inform and transform thought and behavior long after those experiences have ended is as good a working definition of the educational enterprise as one might hope to find. Celebrate the experience! ⏩

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