An Uncommon Journey: The Collaboration Between the University of Texas at El Paso and Victoria University Libraries in Building the Learning Commons

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Since 2006, the University of Texas at El Paso Library and Victoria University Library have enjoyed a long term relationship in the context of the broader VU/UTEP engagement. Although both libraries had experienced a long tradition of cooperation and consortia participation on a state and regional level, this was the first time either library had undergone a significant engagement with an international partner.

The relationship was moved forward in 2006 with the visit of the UTEP Associate Vice President Information Resources and Planning, Robert Stakes as part of the 2008 UTEP delegation to Victoria University, Melbourne. In the following year, Learning Commons Manager Adrian Gallagher was able to return the visit as part of the Victoria University delegation. This was the start of a relationship that lasted over 6 years and saw collaboration in a number of key areas and sustained by further visits, joint presentations and video conference events.

A key feature of the evolution of the relationship between UTEP library and VU was the way each institution influenced the other in the development of learning spaces, service delivery, and student mentoring roles. The joint development and application of the learning commons was at the core of the relationship between the two libraries. In this context, a healthy exchange of principles, design data and service models was reinforced by video conferencing and visiting delegations combined with student exchanges and joint VU/UTEP programs offered in other parts of the university. This relationship involved project work and service evolution as well as planning for the next phase of learning commons development through an exercise in rethinking the concept and purpose of Learning Commons to ensure a stronger alignment with new curriculum and university pedagogies as well as new technologies and delivery modes. Apart from progressing the Learning Commons, the two libraries have also had the benefit of sharing many systems for delivering online resources. This has allowed the collaboration to be extended to sharing experiences and technical data around the operation and delivery of these systems and online services. In the early stages of the relationship, collaboration was also informed by the exchange of survey and quality assurance data to help identify common issues and strategies when redeveloping spaces or planning new services.

Progressing the Learning Commons

The major point of collaboration and sharing throughout the relationship has been the development of the learning commons at both universities and the consequential enhancements to spaces and service delivery. The Learning Commons is here taken to be the integration of a variety of educational services into a common location, usually the university library, as a key movement for re-invigorating libraries across the world. Apart from rethinking educational service delivery, the Learning Commons also has a strong emphasis on transforming traditional spaces to incorporate a range of technologies and accommodate a variety of student learning styles in an environment sensitive to the social dimension of learning. In part, this concept has been a reaction to the growth of technology and the need for university libraries to maintain their relevance in the age of electronic resources and for universities to serve a new generation of students. However it has also been part of a broader university shift to student centred environments characterized by a "culture of learning that is learning-oriented, learner-centred, flexible, collaborative, university-wide and community building" (Keating & Gabb 2005, p.2).

Both universities were attracted to the learning commons concept due to their shared emphasis on student engagement and retention. The commitment to the model was also driven by the recognition of a common mission to provide excellent and accessible education to students from culturally and socially diverse communities who are often the first in their families to attend university. The changing patterns of use of library collections and facilities were also impacting on this shift to learning space redesign. The shift to electronic resources and the demand for technologies were becoming integral parts of the study experience, and were driving factors in the need to redevelop library spaces.

Learning Commons Experience at VU

From 2005, the redevelopment of physical library spaces at Victoria University has been driven by the Learning Commons concept as a central feature of the University's campus planning strategy. The multi-campus nature of the VU Library network – 10 libraries in 2005 – demanded a staged application of the Learning Commons model often timed with other building developments. Apart from developing innovative spaces to feature new technologies and collaborative learning, all locations feature educational support services and programs provided through collaboration between the Library and a variety of other campus entities.

From 2006 to 2007, three major Learning Commons' were created at the City Flinders Campus, St Albans and Werribee. The City Flinders Learning Commons opened in October 2006 as a new facility on the 15 floor of a high rise building. It became the prototype for further Learning Commons development with a mix of partners delivering educational services including Learning Support, Careers, and Information Technology Services.

The St Albans and Werribee Campus Learning Commons were next developed through large scale refurbishments of existing Library spaces. Both Libraries had undergone a transformation as part of the VU University Library HEIP project in 2005, which redeveloped library spaces to support an extensive injection of technology within the library. The further redesigns developed in 2007 enabled the addition of Learning and Language support, and the University's Careers Service to complete the range of educational support services in the VU model. New discrete learning spaces were built in both Werribee and St Albans to allow the application of advanced 'assisted study' environments supported by Teaching and Learning staff and focussed on supporting students form the TAFE sector.

The Victoria University Learning Commons Building Program climaxed in 2011 with the completion of the Footscray Park learning Commons in February and the Footscray Nicholson Learning Commons in July. Built in concert with extensive sport and exercise science teaching and research facilities, the Footscray Park Learning Commons combines extensive technology, teaching spaces and food outlets in an award nominated building featuring an engaging mix of learning spaces and contrasting interior landscapes. The Footscray Nicholson Learning Commons was developed on what was then a predominately TAFE campus to produce a complete refurbishment of an existing building which unites services within the space through a dramatic laneway split across two floors.

One of the distinguishing factors of the Learning Commons approach at Victoria University from most others in this field is its commitment to student mentorship and the benefits students gain from the advice and support of fellow student's acting as mentors. The first point of contact for Learning Commons Services remains the Student Rovers: a student mentoring service recruited and coordinated by Teaching and Learning Staff not reporting to the Library. Beyond the provision of peer mentoring, the rover program has other benefits such as providing opportunities for student employment on campus together with a more 'approachable' level of service presenting as the human face of the Learning Commons. The rover role thus extends to creating a social presence in the Commons by building networks and by establishing friendly relationships with as many students as possible. Apart from the rovers, the emphasis on mentoring was extended beyond 2011 with the employment of Careers mentors, Research Ambassadors and Writing Space Mentors.

When the first Learning Commons was opened at Victoria University in late 2006, a collaborative service model was developed to outline the continuum of service between the different providers and to articulate the levels of specialist skills and expertise deployed to address the range of student learning needs. Although the Library takes the lead in managing the Learning Commons as a facility, each group is free to determine the parameters of their service in the shared space. The partnership relationship is complicated as each of these partners exist as separate organizational units and even though most of these units were initially combined within the same division, they have since shifted into separate portfolios as a consequence of dynamic organizational change within the University. With no formal organizational links between the groups, a full partnership model of independent providers operates within the space and required forums as the 'Learning Commons Operational Group' to coordinate services and address common issues.

The Learning Commons Journey at UTEP Library

The UTEP Library is a modern six story building housing over a million volumes and providing access to over 10,000 periodicals in either hard copy or online. In 2005 it was an example of what people have come to expect of a good library at an institution such as UTEP; that is a well-stocked repository providing access to most of the materials students and scholars needed to be successful and a staff prepared to work with a wide variety of users to meet their needs.

In 2005 UTEP Library leadership began to investigate ways to increase both the Library building's utilization and campus use of digital resources and at the same time support UTEP's commitment to educational access and excellence. What evolved over time was a plan to make the Library building a more hospitable user friendly environment, provide services to support student learning through information literacy instruction and provide access to university student support activities. UTEP's key strategy was to establish the Library as the location of choice for students wishing to access technology to include mass computer labs, high end computer systems, technology enhanced group study rooms and ubiquitous wireless coverage.

These services were to be provided as close to 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as possible. This recognition informed the transformation of the UTEP Library to what latter came to be recognized as a learning commons model. To meet student needs the Library opened a moderate sized computer facility in 2006, saw it immediately fill and remain filled for as many as 14 hours a day. In response to demand they expanded the facility and expanded it again until it now provides access to nearly 300 computers with standing room crowds and high demand times such as the end of a semester. A significant fraction of the computers provide high end services rarely available or affordable for students on their own machines.

The next step in the evolution of the UTEP Library to a learning commons model was an aggressive program to reclaim underused space and transform it into technology enhanced group study rooms. These rooms were created one or two at a time as unused space was identified and funds to purchase technology became available. As each room came online, demand seemed to increase which encouraged the addition of more rooms. Technologies in the rooms include computers, whiteboards, conferencing bridges and video technology. One consequence has been a change in the feel and sound of the building. The quiet somewhat secluded ambiance usually associated with

libraries has been replaced with the constant buzz of hundreds of students interacting with each other and with technology that promotes the learning process.

At some point in this process it was recognized that students needed more than just access to technology. They needed assistance and encouragement to fully utilize the technologies and resources being made available and to help them become information literate. To achieve this, UTEP has transformed its library subject research specialists into being learning facilitators and moved them from behind reference counters to the spaces where students are engaged in utilizing the resources. These library staff members are supplemented by student workers trained to assist students accessing the technology.

The success of these ventures has led to dramatic increases in demand from units outside the Library to provide services in the Library and to create a true learning commons. "Build it and they will come" doesn't always work at an American university, but "build it where they are and they will use it" has a better chance of success. As a result UTEP now operates a help desk, writing center, math center, after hours career development center, veterans center and other support activities in the vicinity of the learning commons because that's where the students are. As the sophistication of the available technology has increased so has the demand for workshops and instructional activities to increase people's ability to fully utilize the technology.

COLLABORATING TO DELIVER THE LEARNING COMMONS

At an early point in the transformation of the Library to a learning commons UTEP began interacting with VU. The universities came together because of a shared recognition that they were both committed to serving non-traditional students. Both were experimenting with new strategies for improving access and student success and with developing an understanding of how to best serve their student demographic. Both were interested in using the Library as an active player in this enterprise. UTEP had embarked on the path described above and VU was in the process of applying their new learning commons model. Over the past five years VU and UTEP have visited each other and shared philosophies and experiences and remained in constant contact using video conferencing. This resulted in the sharing of design, service management and quality data. A careful examination of where both are now in terms of development and implementation would lead to the recognition that many facets of each implementation are indistinguishable.

Much of the early phase of the relationship was around sharing design data for how to re-purpose library spaces to create contemporary learning environments incorporating technologies and meeting different learning needs. The UTEP delegation of 2008 and the VU delegation of 2009 were great opportunities to share plans, visit buildings and assess refurbishments for moving library spaces towards the learning commons model. Particular attention was paid to the challenge of how to integrate technology and collaborative learning spaces yet retain some spaces for client study. The re-purposing of library space – usually collection space – to allow room for new non-library educational services was an important feature of each learning commons development. As the space was refurbished, new issues would arise around service models and how to work cooperatively across the various service areas which reported to different organizational units in the university. A valuable video conference was held in 2011 when manager representatives from the different service areas (library, learning support, writing centre and careers) attended to discuss the challenges of working together in a partnership model and effectively coordinate services to help ensure a seamless experience for students.

An important success factor in the service models for both VU and UTEP was the role of student employees to assist students in the new spaces. Both libraries exchanged duty statements, conditions of employment and related information to help determine best practice in managing student employees in the learning commons and refining their duties, training and service orientation. Therefore the roles of student rovers at VU and miner guides at UTEP were developed along similar lines as assistants not fixed to a specific service point but moving throughout the library spaces to offer help at the point of need. A direct opportunity to share experiences and participate came as part of the student exchanges between VU and UTEP with UTEP

students being successfully placed in VU Library in 2010 and 2011, followed by a VU student working in the UTEP library in 2010. In order to foster further connections between students working in both universities, a video conference was held for student employees in 2010 which allowed students to discuss their roles and experiences of offering services in the learning commons.

Another part of the UTEP/VU collaborative projects was the sharing of learnings from each Library's quality programs. The initial step was for the Libraries to benchmark their 2008 results of their library satisfaction surveys. The Libraries use different library satisfaction measurement survey tools, LibQual and Insync respectively in the assessment of library services in order to facilitate service improvement. LibQual uses a score out of a nine point scale in the categories being evaluated: Affect of service, Information Control and Library as Place. Insync uses a score out of seven in the categories Communication, Service Quality, Service Delivery, Facilities and Equipment, Library Staff and Virtual Library. Interestingly, the main concern for both libraries in the statistical results was the clients' perceptions of individual and quiet study spaces. This issue was also identified as an emerging concern in VU's 2007 survey trend analysis that indicated while gaps for most areas slightly declined and Library performance has increased, the notable exception was individual seating where the gap has increased over the survey years. Other issues identified in the qualitative comments collected in both surveys were around the need for more computers and a demand for both group and quiet study spaces.

Against the background of developing front line services and innovative learning spaces, the two libraries also discovered that they were using the same systems and facing the same challenges of supporting a collection increasingly dominated by electronic resources. At Victoria University, for example, a key tipping point was reached in 2014 where the number of e-books surpassed the number of print works in the collection. Fortunately the two libraries both used the Innovative Millennium Library System for managing library operations, including the library catalogue. VU library were able to share experience, technical details and expertize about how the Encore search engine functionality was implemented on Millennium

and later our early experiences of applying a discovery layer (Summon). UTEP library, on the other hand, had been an early user of the Springshare Libguide product for organizing library support materials in a web format and were able to advise VU Library on their approach. These learnings were successfully applied when a Libguide was used for sharing information resources for the Global Learning Community unit undertaken by both UTEP and VU students. Cooperative work on this unit was also an opportunity to tackle the range of access and identity issues raised by having students from different institutions using electronic information resources hosted across different universities.

THE FUTURE OF THE LEARNING COMMONS: CAN THE UNIVERSITY ITSELF BECOME A LEARNING COMMONS?

In 2013 both libraries engaged in some blue sky thinking to envision whether the whole university might be thought of as an extended learning commons with physical and virtual spaces dedicated to achieving excellent, engaged and accessible education and research. In this future there would be spaces that are designed to support learning and research and the outcomes of the curriculum and of researchers. Clearly the maturation of online education and the growth of mobile devices and their ubiquitous nature will in time decrease the demand for the traditional classroom. This is particularly true at both universities where a majority of students balance school with other requirements. Other research suggests that students choose educational programs based on cost, convenience and reputation. The success of 'for profit schools' in the US, which are often more expensive than not for profits and have less of a reputation, suggests that for large segments of the community, convenience might be more of decisive factor than usually recognized.

To see the university as a Learning Commons it is necessary to draw on lessons learned from two areas, Academic Libraries and Online Learning. We know that students and teachers can interact over the internet but they still need to enter the physical campus to make use of the many flexible and multipurpose spaces based on the learning commons philosophy and

methodology. These spaces can be used for research and learning where there is no specific discipline requirement. Support for the use of these spaces is provided by student peer mentors and learning support staff working with academics to foster and promote creative, collaborative and interdisciplinary learning. Older university buildings can be and are retro-fitted to encompass these spaces and technologies are ever present and used as a matter of course whenever their use is advantageous for learning. Students and teachers use these spaces via mobile technologies and so the latest infrastructure and web content for the mobile online environment is provided behind the scenes.

Modes of learning are blended in a way that is seamless so that not all participants need to be physically present and teachers offer a choice of ways and opportunities in which students will learn. Online is the dominant mode especially for reflection, resources, interactive learning, assessment, experiments and practical lab work; however students and teachers attend the physical campus when it is their preferred mode of learning and teaching at the times of their choosing. Much hands-on practical learning occurs outside of the campus in places of work and in the community.

Learning and research at the university are conducted as partnerships: student to teacher, teacher to student, learning support to teacher, librarian to student, researcher to teacher and so on. The teachers through the various spaces both virtual and physical have responsibility for structured learning and facilitation but also for encouraging and allowing unstructured learning. The roles of teachers and students are less differentiated than now. In these spaces social and intellectual activities are encouraged and it is often difficult to tell them apart. The use of cafes for structured learning is not unusual and sometimes the rooms dedicated to learning resemble cafes, theatres, film studios and other spaces now regarded primarily as social spaces.

So where does the library fit into this new vision of a university? University libraries, and librarians, are heavily impacted by the technological transformation of information needed to support research and curriculums, and learning. The transition to electronic databases of journals and monographs, e-books, digital repositories and the like have required librarians to adapt their skills and responsibilities to these technology

platforms. Furthermore the library is as integral and important as ever, managing and organizing the critical mass of scholarly resources that underpins qualitative intellectual enquiry and supports a range of scholarly interactions. The library continues its curatorial role with the development of collections of information resources that are targeted at the areas of learning, nearly all of which are online and hosted externally. Physical items such as books are a novelty and part of special collections. The library also oversees the selection and provides access to a collection of software that is hosted externally. The library has a strong knowledge-sharing role including: managing repositories of research output, supporting and providing access to data sets, managing the publication of peer review e-books and journals, and supporting researchers with information seeking and data management. The most visible embodiment of the library, however, is in the oversight of learning spaces, assisting users with information resources and imparting expertise in research skills development. The librarians themselves also play a critical role in serving the educational community by storing information, accessing information and assessing information.

Beyond the physical library, important questions remain around the online presence of future learning commons services in an environment where both academic support process and learning resources shift online. It can be challenging to reproduce the learning commons model in an online environment as demonstrated in the limitations of web page delivery or service linked via Learning Management Systems. What will be the remaining role for the one-stop human capital invested in learning commons services when the bulk of transactions can be completed through the web? Although there has been some promising contributions from student mentors to online social networking services, it is still unclear how far web based interactive and textual support resources will replace the front line learning commons services currently designed to be the first port of call for those seeking help with the academic environment. Facing this challenge can be seen in the latest addition to the VU Footscray Park Learning Commons: the Innovation Hub. The Innovation Hub is equipped with both software and hardware to enable staff to create and develop innovative learning resources for the VU Collaborate Learning environment. It is staffed by eLearning Designers dedicated to upskill academics developing online content in

advanced educational technologies required for new media and learning object creation. Librarians can also have a role here as the traditional support through information literacy extend to encompass the digital literacies required to both create content in an online environment and aid student learning as it shifts to the online experience.

FURTHER READING

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