

Creating a Library Powerhouse

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Abstract

Within the context of 21st century learning and teaching, libraries have been obliged to reassess their resource base and augment their professional support services. The previously established power of the library as a space that guides and develops student knowledge is being challenged and some library professionals feel they may be entering into a 'professional competition' with ICTs, online research modules, e-texts and the like. Library staff who believe they have little to offer the 21st century learning context are beginning to feel powerless and inadequate.

This paper will raise three critical questions connected with the power of libraries and the context within which they currently exist. Firstly, with so much information available freely online is the intellectual power and credibility that librarians have enjoyed for generations being diluted? Secondly, does the plethora of technology available in the wider community affect the ability of librarians to build and sustain the traditional academic space typically associated with their domain? Finally, is the library space still a powerhouse for knowledge or is it in need of reinventing its identity to become a powerhouse for collaborative and community learning?

Using the School Library as its predominant focus, this presentation will consider how the role and responsibility of the library can be 'reinvented' to ensure its power within the scholastic educational landscape is reaffirmed and how it can endorse its reputation as an educationally and socially progressive powerhouse for the individual, immediate community and broader national and international community.

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Introduction

The library profession is, by its very nature, a dynamic component of modern society and this dynamism is evident through the most fundamental mechanisms of Information Literacy. Libraries constantly evolve by creating, absorbing and developing systems through which humans communicate and by which society establishes its social, cultural and educational parameters. In recent years there has been a clear paradigm shift in library accountabilities and expectations and this has generated the creation of a new library landscape – a landscape that, in many ways, challenges the traditional practices at the very soul of the profession. With the launch of each new ICT resource a new ‘learning landscape’ is created and educators need to keep abreast of these advances so they may provide the very best services for their clients. Similarly, reinforcing the significance of good quality literature and developing the essential skills of literary criticism in young learners is a crucial factor in continuing ‘best practice’ within the library profession.

This paper will broadly discuss a variety of issues related to the sustainability of libraries and those working in them and will consider three main concerns. Firstly, given 21st century technology provides access to massive amounts of previously inaccessible information and resources, the intellectual power and credibility of librarians is being diluted. In a world where ‘anyone is an expert’ the challenge for librarians is to remain visible and viable in a ‘technology drenched’ society. Secondly, with members of the general public now in the position to access all this information, one may well ask why it would be necessary to visit a library ever again; thus suggesting the ability of librarians to build and sustain their traditional academic space is under threat. Thirdly, throughout recent history, libraries have needed to reinvent themselves to accommodate the changing needs and expectations of the user, to embrace the changing demands and benefits of new technology and provide library spaces that can serve as social and interactive learning centres (Abrams:64). For libraries to remain ‘powerhouses’ of information and cultural relevance they must begin a ‘reconstruction’ phase enabling them to become clearly recognisable as collaborative and community learning spaces. In addressing each of these concerns, the fundamental focus will be to explore the need for libraries to acknowledge the changing nature of pedagogical expectations, the nature of differentiation and learning styles, and the need to create easily accessible spaces that are highlighted by flexibility, collaboration and socially interactive learning. Once the space is created, the learning will follow and flourish.

When envisioning new learning spaces for a library, it is essential that the mission and role of that library are closely aligned with the needs of the user and the broader community (Feinberg and Keller:34). There needs to be a clearly established (and understood) core philosophy of patron service and how that service is to be reflected in the spaces created. Additionally, gaining staff input is essential when considering the ‘re-creation’ of a space (Feinberg and Keller:35). Library spaces now must not only reflect the needs of current and future users, but embrace the social and collaborative nature of modern learning; ‘old spaces’ need to be reconfigured to reflect ‘new philosophies’. When libraries acquire or create new spaces, professional practice and staffing attitudes must also develop to reflect and embrace this change. Libraries and library staff need to become more efficient, functional and flexible while physical spaces can be repurposed and redefined (but not necessarily rebuilt).

With new builds, there needs to be a greater sense of space, natural light and transparency between staff and public spaces – and an open floor plan ought to be a core objective (Abrams:65).

Libraries stand as visible symbols of an institution's commitment to the cultivation of the mind and librarians must weave the library into the fabric of the institution so that it is seen as an essential destination for students, scholars and the broader intellectual community. That said, it is also essential for library spaces to provide the appropriate learning and teaching venues as demanded (and expected) by students and staff. More is required than a classroom setup of desks, chairs and an electronic whiteboard as current learning and teaching practice demands flexible, collaborative and interactive learning spaces and resources. New conceptions of the classroom are being driven by the emergence of new methods of teaching and learning, which have been made possible by rapid technological development. Learning has become a constructive process which has encouraged educationalists and architects to redesign schools and libraries so that they foster both collaborative learning and active learning. There also needs to be an understanding of how the digital environment is shaping and influencing the learning (and teaching) process. These pedagogical developments have also required students to change the ways they are expected to engage with their study and learning environment: collaboration and team-building have become common components of the teaching and learning process; group research projects and conferencing are now the norm; and active learning techniques are commonplace for both teachers and learners (Forrest and Hinchliffe:296).

The recently completed Griffith University Gold Coast Library extension and Gumurri Centre is an appropriate case study in this instance. The extension of the original building was approved as part of the University's 2010-2012 Capital Management Plan and called for visionary ideas to maximise the value of the existing buildings whilst contributing to the sustainable transformation of the university's campus. Architects and designers recognised the value of the soul of the library, and the significance of creating a sense of escape, choice and community. Library spaces serve as meeting points and places of reflection, exploration and study. They need to be inherently agile spaces that students actually want to occupy under differing circumstances (Legerton:53).

This tri-level building operates as a totally flexible series of spaces with some areas operating 24 hours a day. There is an overriding sense of the library's spaces being 'student-centric'; administration areas are somewhat removed from the main thoroughfares but assistance is close at hand with several help stations positioned throughout the building. The design of this library encourages collaboration and social learning but at the same time allows for concentration and immersion through the clever design of different spaces and access points. The extension was designed to triangulate with the original building thus reducing the level of disruption to students and general campus life. The library is now accessible from multiple entry points and has established a 'continuous pedestrian loop' that provides a meeting point for students from multiple faculties.

The library's multi-functional design has avoided adding generic teaching and learning spaces that may well become redundant. On the ground floor, a split level study hall area with a ramped and stepped link allows for the extension of fluidity of

movement throughout the spaces. Technologically advanced seating hubs, upholstered joinery and collaborative spaces are in keeping with the overall student-centric approach. The mid-level of the building houses a variety of bookable seminar spaces and includes a large 80 person seminar room which is flanked by two smaller 30 person spaces. The extended collection is found on this level along with private silent study areas. The hierarchy of the building is clearly student-centred as the upper level contains the staff areas. The relative remoteness of the library's administration demonstrates the shift towards student hubs that are increasingly becoming managed by the students themselves. This extension offers students choice, outreach and collaboration. Various formal and informal areas enable students to meet, learn, withdraw, relax, share and access myriad support services. People are the most important components in this library design and extension.

The question of library use, role and value still remains. Will the internet and the influx of electronic media deter people from coming to libraries? A similar concern highlights online material access. If, with the mass of online data currently available, libraries no longer acquire physical resources and materials, is there a point to having a building to store them? In short, Burke (2004:74) argues that libraries need to provide both the scholarly tools for which they were intended along with space for people to converge. In the school library context, how children feel when entering and using a library will affect their attitude, expectations and behaviour not only when they are children but when they become adults (Feinberg and Keller:34). Young learners need to have a sense of place and space within their environment and libraries can provide a positive experience for young learners. It is here that librarians also present themselves as an influencing force not only regarding space management but space tone as a direct result of the welcome and warmth that is extended to each individual entering the space. Libraries are profoundly and fundamentally different from bookstores or 'the cloud' by the very nature of having within their resource base the presence of a librarian. Essentially, purpose, space and personality combine to play a major role in assuring libraries and librarians remain social and intellectual powerhouses.

Space is of the essence and how that space is designed, maintained and managed will directly influence the value placed upon that space. Modern library and learning space design requires a deep understanding of both the independent and active learning behaviours of students and an appreciation of teaching strategies. Forrest and Hinchliffe (2005:297) argue that all libraries need to offer a variety of comfortable and flexible learning spaces that will support both individual and collaborative study styles. The library space needs to be designed so that both formal instructional activities and informal collaborative activities can be held concurrently. The design must also allow for: computer clusters; classroom instruction areas that allow for both traditional rows and more flexible arrangements; media viewing areas and an event area for hosting functions (Forrest and Hinchliffe:299). Similarly, listening to and incorporating the needs of library staff and the community will underpin good library design. Design teams need to become educated and immersed in the behaviour patterns, learning needs and tastes of library users. It is important that any library design integrate ideas about how children and teens learn and perceive the world; designers must understand how architecture and design features can influence learning and usage patterns. Ultimately, designing a successful learning space for young people includes consideration of the perceived physical space and the equally

important intuitive space (Feinberg and Keller:35) suggesting that the interactions occurring in the given space will affect how that space, its contents and habitation will influence the daily lives of its users.

So, what value does public space hold for educationalists and the broader community? Giddens (as cited in Shilling and Cousins:427) suggests that space is at the very heart of social theory and should be regarded as most important for the conduct of empirical research in the social sciences. Furthermore, Elmborg (2011:341) supports the ideal that places are social, cultural and personal constructs that we hold in our minds. Habermas (as cited in Elmborg 2011:34) argued that the rise of the middle class from the 18th century through to the 19th century was influenced by the development of public spaces where citizens could meet and discuss issues of the day. What we today understand of libraries as public spaces with their democratic overtones supports this notion. Interestingly, Habermas traces the decline of the public sphere to increasingly sophisticated capitalist practices that changed citizens from critical thinkers into uncritical consumers. These new capitalist practices encouraged communities to reduce public space and replace it with commercial space. The challenge today is to re-create a new truly inclusive public sphere and this is where public and school libraries can play a major role.

Van Slyck (2001:519) maintains that librarianship is intertwined (and always has been) with the notion of library as a physical and democratic space. The physical space is important as it reveals the philosophy of the library more clearly than words ever could. (A library space that mimics the panopticon arrangement of prison architecture, distributing bookshelves radially to allow ease of supervision, turns the librarian into a prison guard.) While the democratic space encourages all to meet, discuss and learn. The notion of library space as democratic space is further enhanced through Van Slyck's (2001:519) reference to Lillian Gunter, the first paid librarian in Gainesville, Texas, whose vision for the library became a reality in 1908 after securing funds from Andrew Carnegie. Her vision of the library's physical space included open book stacks and a children's reading area. Her vision of the library's democratic space included a basement auditorium and two club rooms for groups to meet to discuss community issues; but her plans also included what her diary refers to as 'the negro reading room' (2001:520). Initially this room was destined to be placed between the janitor's cupboard and the back door (which speaks volumes about racial hierarchy). Sadly, this room was not ever used as it was intended but it highlighted a section of the community that had no access to library services.

The purpose and use of library space is also a crucial factor when considering the intended uses of the spaces and the activities (learning or otherwise) that occur in them. Shilling and Cousins (1990:414/5) conceptualised student use and the social aspect of library space into four broad categories: Colonisation, the imposition of cultural values and forms of behaviour by students that may run counter to the norms of the 'ideal' library; Regulation, where the librarian is the primary referent; and Association and Disassociation, which refer respectively to the territorial occupation or vacation by different groups of students. Through the concept of regulation, the primary use of the library space is generated and maintained by the supervising person (in this case, for example, the librarian). Here there is little flexibility for moving beyond the notion of 'libraries are for school work' and the norms of behaviour enforced in such a space reflect this notion.

Furthermore, the association and disassociation of students with the library space is an important consideration when analysing library space, its purpose and intension. These two concepts refer to the presence or absence of students in the library. Whether students associate or disassociate with the library space will be determined by a variety of factors, including the resulting possibilities of colonisation and regulation. A library space that is poorly regulated may encourage the association of those not interested in studying and therefore disassociate those who wish to study. This may also go some way to explaining why some students, many of whom regard the library as a safe space, are keen to take on the role of 'library monitor' (or similar) while others are horrified by the idea. Similarly, some students may find safety and comfort in a regulated area rather than an area that has been colonised. Educational space does not necessarily determine individual behaviour within a school but social interaction does take place within special contexts and the organisation and use of space is inseparable from the reproduction of power relations both inside and outside the classroom (Shilling and Cousins:428) As such, educational space and social space are intrinsically linked and ought to be considered concurrently in the context of designing and developing library spaces.

Libraries have an historical ethos of free access for all and currently some of these spaces are beginning to struggle to justify their existence in a world of 24/7 online access. To meet this challenge unique library spaces need to be developed; spaces that can encourage ways of working with increasingly diverse populations in increasingly dynamic contexts. Here the 'third space' may be part of the solution (Elmborg:338). Daily existence has both the 'work' space and the 'home' space; there is now the possibility of 'reconstructing the library' so that it may become that 'third' space – a place that, while dominated by classification systems and rules for behaviour and use, can allow every user to become a borderland person, intellectually crossing boundaries and moving between what one is and what one hopes to become. In this context, libraries may be either highly articulated places or indeterminate open spaces, with the potential for adventure and surprise. Plus, librarians become more aware of cultural and personal borders and empathetic towards the notion that people are constantly between stages of development and struggling towards fulfilment (Elmborg:346).

Elmborg (2001:347) argues there are two ways of organising space. The first is somewhat authoritarian, aims at a single, predetermined objective and has the desire to control events and the people within its boundaries. The second is to create a social space as a living process which imparts key areas of activity and favours living relationships and activities that come from diversity and interaction. It is this 'third space' that will encourage conversation and community while generating cultural, social and academic connections between and within the users of the space. This will ultimately allow the library to reflect and provide for the needs and desires of the community rather than simply providing and reinforcing literary concepts and concerns.

In the main, people generally think of space as empty until it is filled. In the case of library spaces, considerable thought must be given to not only what is placed within the available space, but what is encouraged (and discouraged) from happening within the space. Pedagogical development has brought about a clear paradigm shift within

the realm of learning and teaching; and it is this shift that has challenged the assumed and traditional uses of educational space. For example, the playing of games in today's public and school libraries (once the bane of teachers and librarians) is a profoundly social experience and encourages, in the main, learning amongst experts and novices. Libraries are encouraging children to become 'more busy' with their play and using games to support the learning process is becoming more and more popular. Similarly, the development of technology within the community at large has established an era of 'colloquy' (Heath:20) where both collaborative communication and work have become well established. So too, then, should collaborative and inclusive communication become a focus for library space. Value must be placed upon the processes of learning as well as the final product of that learning.

All learners (and learning programs) require a certain level of flexibility; the flexibility to change from one activity to the next, the flexibility to support a variety of resource types and requirements and, ultimately, the flexibility to embrace a variety of learning and teaching procedures. Learners of all ages need spaces in which to work, not a single work space. Assigning students a single workspace does not provide the opportunity for them to learn how best to learn. The flexibility to work singularly and with individual focus and reflection is equally as important as working collaboratively. Different learning styles require different approaches. To provide all learners with the opportunity to reach their full potential, it is essential that schools and libraries create learning spaces that enhance both the social and the learning experience through the use of well-considered, flexible spaces that encourage collaboration, reflection and a sense of ownership of space and design.

In so doing, libraries will no longer be the aged reservoirs of the past, but powerhouses for the future.

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