LEARNING COMMONS

Where learning can be SEEN & the sounds of learning can be HEARD

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Conventional Academic Libraries have invariably acted as *gatekeepers* and their interior design has reflected their role as the guardians of printed materials and their function as processing and preserving such collections. Instead the Academic Library of tomorrow should become a space where specialized public services support and enhance the entire spectrum of learning; *i.e. from idea formation to knowledge production.* Similarly, librarians need "*to acknowledge that students and faculty have gravitated toward interactive learning and collaboration in the analysis, presentation, and publication of knowledge because of their increasing reliance on electronic databases, digitized formats, and interactive media. While many areas for quiet study* [will] *remain throughout the library, the sounds of learning are encouraged*".(Lombardi & Wall, 2006, p 17.3) As such the library of tomorrow resembles more a modern commercial bookstore or cybercafé where skilled staff work in close proximity to the users in an environment that reflects flexibility, and at one and the same time opportunity for academic scholarship and relaxation. The Learning Commons in the new AUC library is, of course, the ideal space where this can happen.

Nevertheless, the achievement of such an objective also requires a re-envisioning of Library and Learning Technologies (LLT) in such a way so as to be able to provide users a seamless, easy and convenient access to the full range of services and support required by modern scholarly activity and in the appropriate medium and format. Thus, instructional technologists, IT specialists and technicians work alongside reference librarians to form a team that provides targeted support to users as and when required. For example, e-printing and multimedia production of assignments should be available within the same space as access to electronic resources and information and writing skills guidance. For students the separation of such services into distinct and autonomous units does not make sense. They expect and require a multiplicity of services to be available within a transparent and easily accessible **single entity; the Learning Commons**.

Such a re-envisioning, of course, also generates additional benefits for the entire university community. Close collaboration between the various specialized units of LLT will also enhance a new culture of collaborative work, cooperation in providing services and foremost the provision of resources and support that exemplify a "central LLT image" to users. Thus, students will find compatibility between software deployed in classrooms and other campus machines with those provided within the Learning Commons. Faculty and students will receive similar induction and training in the use of learning management systems and other specialize software (e.g. SPSS or GIS) and thus eliminate incompatible learning curves. Furthermore, the provision of a single and coherent "central LLT image", to be seen by all users, will also enhance efficient management solutions to issues raised by users. This **visibility and coherence** of LLT seamless services can only contribute to enhancing learning across the University.

In this respect it is possible to suggest that Learning can come to life and can be both ***seen and heard*** within a Learning Commons environment. An environment which if designed well can ensure that users gain maximum value from their respective forms of social interaction with each other and staff. In fact the Learning Commons should approximate as much as possible

A space not unlike the ancient marketplace or agora, serving students and faculty as an inviting "third place." Neither a formal workplace (scheduled classroom) nor a private realm (office, dormitory or

apartment), the Library becomes a center for student life as well as intellectual hub and laboratory for learning. (Lombardi & Wall, 2006, p 17.1)

How do we achieve such an objective, however, and also ensure that our future Learning Commons in the new campus Library fulfils the expectations of its users? Diana Oblinger suggests that this has to do primarily with our professional culture and experiences and what expectations we have. In other words how we see things? Oblinger goes on to ask

When thinking about colleges and universities, what do you see? First and foremost, you see learners—students, faculty, and staff. You see learning—active, experiential, reflective, and collaborative. You see places—classrooms, laboratories, libraries, cafés, and virtual spaces. And, you see technology—computers, wireless networks, digital learning resources, search engines, and analytical tools. [Thus], if we are committed to transforming learning, perhaps we should practice Da Vinci's <u>saper vedere</u>—knowing how to see. (Oblinger, 2006, p 14.1)

Yet, when asked to describe a library many of us revert to conventional accounts that resemble a warehouse for storing books rather than active spaces where learning comes to life. What should we see? Again Oblinger suggests

What if you "saw" something different? What if you saw learners rather than lecturers? What if you saw chatter rather than silence and action rather than stillness? What if you saw learning as something social rather than something cerebral? What would be different? Expectations? Learning spaces? Learning? (Oblinger, 2006, p 14.2)

What Oblinger is suggesting is that we have to learn how to see in a different way and thus allow words such as *learning, engagement, interaction,* and *excitement* become pervasive in our vocabulary and cognitive structures. Furthermore, we have to learn to see space shaped by learning, a service philosophy prevailing, technology integration in all aspects of or service delivery, experimentation and innovation and especially user involvement. For example, we need to ask what learning activities and forms of social interaction will enhance certain learning outcomes as compared to which projection system we should install. We may find that flexible and movable furniture that enables group work and peer-to-peer instruction adds greater value to learning than extensive reference shelves stacked with reference material. We may even find that designing "socially catalytic" spaces has a greater impact on student learning than ensuring "silence" prevails within the Library. In fact, Oblinger notes that "*learning commons provide spaces for interaction and exchange; <u>silence is not required</u>*". (Oblinger, 2006, p 14.4) Thus, Oblinger is suggesting that we have to learn to see differently if we are to achieve the objective of enhancing learning in our modern library. A point echoed by Les Watson who notes that *"We spend a lot of time trying to change people. The thing to do is to change the environment and people will change themselves."* (Watson, 2006, p 24)

What can we conclude from the above? The Learning Commons is a space which will have to accommodate different activities, each of which will be associated with different behavioral patterns. As such the Learning Commons is likely to be the ***<u>most multifunctional space within the University</u>***. It should provide "*social spaces, student services and study support, book and laptop loan, access to IT, and different kinds of working environments, from comfortable seating for collaborative group work, to 'board rooms' for practice presentations*". (Watson, 2006, p 22) To ensure that this will happen we need to start thinking and seeing Learning in a different way. We must evolve collectively a new vision of the Library which abandons the conventional view of it as a warehouse for books.

Sources:
- Les Watson, (2006) pro vice-chancellor, Glasgow Caledonian University, quoted in Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), **Designing Space for Effective Learning: A Guide to 21st Century Learning Space Design** (Bristol, U.K.: Higher Education Funding Council for England)
- Marilyn M Lombardi and Thomas B Wall (2006), *Perkins Library- Duke University*, in **Learning Spaces**, edited by Diana Oblinger, EDUCAUSE pp 17.1 to 17.10.
- Diana G Oblinger, (2006), *Learning How to See*, in **Learning Spaces**, edited by Diana Oblinger, EDUCAUSE pp 14.1 to 14.11.