

Social Learning Spaces in the Li Ka Shing Library

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Abstract

This paper describes the efforts made by the Li Ka Shing Library, Singapore Management University, in the design, creation and continual improvements of its spaces to meet the needs of its community. The Collaborative Study Area was presented as an example of introducing social learning spaces into the Library. We conducted a survey to measure the satisfaction with our spaces and the activities carried out in the Library. In striving to become a research, social and event space for its community, the Library is also used as an event and training space. This article was presented as a paper at the LAS Conference in May 2008.

Introduction

Academic libraries have progressed from being storage spaces for information with some reading tables to becoming places which “must reflect the values, mission, and goals of the institution of which it is a part, while also accommodating myriad new information and learning technologies and the ways we access and use them. As an extension of the classroom, the library space must embody new pedagogies, including collaborative and interactive learning modalities. Significantly, the library must serve as the principal building on campus where one can truly experience and benefit from the centrality of an institution’s intellectual community.” (Freeman, 2005, p. 2)

In line with the mission of the Singapore Management University (2008) which is “committed to an interactive, participative and technologically-enabled learning experience”, one of the goals of the Li Ka Shing Library (2008) is to “Develop the Li Ka Shing Library as a focal point for campus research and learning and as a research, social and event space for the SMU and library community”.

The purpose of this article is to describe the efforts made by the Li Ka Shing Library, Singapore Management University, in the design, creation and evaluation of its social learning spaces.

Defining Social Learning

Learning “takes place in individuals’ minds, and it takes place as a social, participatory process” (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 2). They identified the distinctive meanings of social learning as:

1. Active social mediation of individual learning
2. Social mediation as participatory knowledge construction
3. Social mediation by cultural scaffolding
4. The social entity as a learning system
5. Learning to be a social learner
6. Learning social content

The components of a social theory of learning were defined to include (Wenger, 1998, p. 5):

1. Meaning – learning as experience
2. Practice – learning as doing
3. Community – learning as belonging
4. Identity – learning as becoming

Bruffee defined collaborative learning as a process “to help students test the quality and value of what they know by trying to make sense of it to other people like themselves – their peers” and that it “personalizes knowledge by socializing it, providing students with a social context of learning peers with whom they are engaged on conceptual issues” (1981, p. 745).

The library can play a role in promoting social learning in all the above forms by providing a place where individuals interact with others to deepen their understanding of a topic and also to learn how to get along with others and to learn to make collaborative decisions as a group or as a team.

Planning Learning Space

Bennett pointed out that the nature of the educational experience that should happen in the space should be the fundamental concern and identified some questions to ask when planning the renovation of a learning space (Bennett, 2007b).

- > What learning will happen in this space?
- > How might this space be designed to encourage students to spend more time studying?
- > What position on the spectrum from isolated study to collaborative study should this space be designed?
- > How might this space enrich educational experiences?

Bennett put forward strong arguments for a physical space, as compared to a virtual space, where immersion learning, social learning and collaborative learning could take place. We will use some of the questions posed by Bennett to present the case study of Li Ka Shing Library as a social learning space.

User Learning Styles

In order to answer the question “What learning that will happen in this space?”, we looked at the research done on learning behaviors of university students.

A study on the out-of-class learning activities of university students in Hong Kong found that “many students had a habit of studying and working together during term time” and “most of them ... could be found in the library where they learned together” (Yan & Kember, 2004, p. 427). Although all the students in their study reported group

activity, some students behaved as avoiders and employed strategies to minimize their study effort (like sharing notes and helping each other memorize), while others behaved as engagers and employed strategies to master, evaluate and apply what they had learnt into a real life context.

Bennett conducted surveys of American university students designed to identify which learning behaviors were important. The top 4 behaviors identified as important/very important were (Bennett, 2007a, p. 172):

1. Conversations with students with different values (75%)
2. Discussions of readings outside of class (66%)
3. Conversations with students of different race (62%)
4. Group study (60%)

The students in his survey were asked what should be included in a possible commons space in the library and they rated the following as “gotta have”: extended hours (80%), comfortable lounge seating (75%), café (54%), more group study (37%), and tables for collaborative work (35%) (Bennett, 2007a, p. 171).

The University of Florida Libraries also studied their users’ needs. The project team conducted site visits, surveys and focus groups. They reported the results of a survey by another university department which “reached a fairly large percentage of people who never study in a library or sometimes study in a library” and found

that “study in groups” and “study alone in place where others are studying alone, such as the library” were important activities. (Cataldo, Freund, Ochoa, & Salcedo, 2006, p. 31).

They also reported the results of a design workshop conducted hosted by the School of Art and Art History on using technology in the library. Some of the comments by the participants from the brainstorming session were: soundproof collaboration rooms, large community tables, more open spaces (Cataldo et al., 2006, p. 32).

On the issue of space and environment, the project team found that “space and comfort were the paramount themes”, that the “library should accommodate both group and individual quiet-study areas” and that “adaptability should be available wherever possible” (Cataldo et al., 2006, p. 36).

Comparison of Spaces in Asia-Pacific libraries

In a recent informal survey of 71 libraries in the region, we can see that “Asia-Pacific libraries have incorporated many different types of learning spaces, including cafés, computer and media labs, rare book and special collections rooms, exhibit spaces, theatres, auditoriums and rental spaces” (Pagell, 2007). The survey also asked librarians how their users used their libraries. From the responses, librarian thought that their users usually come to the library to study, use the library computers and borrow books.

Table 1: Seating and Activities in Asia Pacific Libraries

Seating Available in Asia-Pacific Libraries		How Librarians Perceive their Libraries are being Used		
Type of Seating	Asia-Pacific (n=71)		Activities	
Group Tables	87%	Top: Usually	Study	81%
Individual Carrels	83%		Use library computers	80%
Soft Seating	79%		Borrow a book	55%
Open Collaborative Area	73%	Sometimes	Ask questions or consult with librarian	75%
Reading Room	68%		Use own computers	66%
Library Classroom	68%		Attend training or orientation	64%
Course Reserve Area	66%		Meet with study group	60%
Information Commons	56%	Bottom: Not often/ Never/NA	Visit the Café	39 %
Project Rooms	55%		Attend a function or exhibition	34%

Libraries in the Asia Pacific are at the stage where they provide soft seating, open collaborative areas, information commons, classrooms and project rooms, beyond just group tables, individual carrels and course reserve areas. The librarians also recognize that their users come to do a variety of activities. Perhaps more research could be done to confirm what our users are actually doing in the library.

Space Design for Collaborative Study Area

The Library staff moved into our new building in 2005. We took time to settle into the building and made changes to the original layout as we observed how our students were using the spaces.

Bennett asked the question “How might this space be designed to encourage students to spend more time studying?” but for SMU which had already identified its learning pedagogy, we asked a different question. We asked instead, “How could we design a study area for students that reflected the way they learned in the classroom?” The area on Level 2 originally had shelving for current journals with the usual tables and chairs. The area was cleared to host the opening ceremonies for the campus. It was an opportunity to re-configure the space to align it with student learning outside the classroom. The Library asked for and was successful in getting extra funding to convert the area into a collaborative space. We came up with the following design principles and mapped them to the qualities of good library space as identified by McDonald (2006).

A professional design firm, Philips Design, was used. We worked with Philips Design to come up with some prototypes based on our design principles. For consistency with other areas in the Library, the SMU corporate colour scheme was used.

The next question Bennett asked was: “What position on the spectrum from isolated study to collaborative study should this space be designed?” However in our context, the Library already had 33 enclosed project rooms which can be booked by students, open tables, carrel seating for private study and casual seating (See Table 2). We wanted this space to be for collaborative study and to be a lively discussion area as envisioned by Freeman.

Table 2: Design Principles & Qualities of Library Space

Design Principles	Qualities
The space encourages interaction and participation. The space should be people-oriented. The students should be able to configure the project spaces to their needs. Hence the furniture would need to be flexible and movable.	Functional Adaptable Interactive Conducive Varied
The space should be accessible and must be easy to monitor when the library was open extended hours. Hence the area would need to be open and yet give a sense of intimacy for the group using each pod.	Accessible Safe and secure Efficient Environmental suitable
The space should be technology-enabled. Hence power and network connections should be available.	Suitable for information technology

“Libraries must provide numerous technology-infused group study rooms and project-development spaces. As “laboratories that learn”, these spaces are designed to be easily reconfigured in response to new technologies and pedagogies. In this interactive learning environment, it is important to accommodate the sound of learning – lively group discussions or intense conversations over coffee.”

(Freeman, 2005, p. 5)

We asked instead “How can we use furniture to create the feel of a collaborative project area in this open space?” We planned to develop a people-oriented and contemporary layout that would appeal to students and meet their needs. We involved the Dean of Students and the students at SMU in the design of the CSA. We had students of all sizes and nationalities try out different furniture configurations proposed by Philips Design. We involved our handicapped students as well. In trying to decide between two chair models, the students asked for and got both. The raised “lazy susan” proposed for the centre of the table to swivel a laptop was changed to be flush with the rest of the table as the students felt it was not practical and that the laptop wiring would just get entangled.

We planned publicity for the CSA. We had email blasts about the CSA and held a grand opening by the SMU President, Prof Howard Hunter on 9 November 2006. Our university newsletter, SMU Hub, published an article on the CSA in January 2007.

Table 3: Layout of LKS Library

Level 2

Entrance & Exit of Library

Collaborative Study Area

> Project spaces

> Tables & seats

Customer Services Centre

Cafe

Course Reserves

> Tables & seats

<http://library.smu.edu.sg/images/L2.gif>

Level 3

Information Services Centre

Library Computers

Library Office

Reading area

> Tables & seats

> Sofas

Project Rooms

Reference & Periodicals Collection

<http://library.smu.edu.sg/images/L3.gif>

Level 4

Library Computers

Reading areas

> Tables & seats

> Carrels

Project Rooms

Lending Collection

<http://library.smu.edu.sg/images/L4.gif>

Level 5

Training Room

Reading Room

> Tables & seats

Project Rooms

<http://library.smu.edu.sg/images/L5.gif>

Table 4: Rating of Library Building as a Place for Studying and Research

	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent	Good & Excellent	Response Total
2007	2.3%	11.4%	53.5%	31.5%	85.0%	945
2006	1.5%	12.2%	47.9%	37.5%	85.4%	706

Evaluation of Library Space & Collaborative Study Area

Bennett recommended asking this question “How might this space enrich educational experiences?” when designing a learning space. He proposed that by “providing congenial, productive, and merit-conferring learning spaces” to accommodate independent study, capstone experiences, and learning communities”, and not forgetting having serious conversations with other students, it would make these behaviors more attractive to students to engage in (Bennett, 2007b, p. 22).

We wanted to evaluate how successful the Li Ka Shing Library was in being a research, social and event space for the SMU.

The Library had done annual surveys in 2006 and 2007. One of the questions asked was: Rate the library building as a place for studying and research. We have maintained the good and excellent rating at 85%. (See Table 4).

However, there were no specific questions about individual areas in the Library. A smaller survey was conducted in March to April 2008 to evaluate the CSA specifically. The total number of respondents was 289 with undergraduates making up 94% of the respondents. (See Table 5).

The user satisfaction with the ambience, furniture and layout of CSA averaged 75%. The satisfaction with the Smartboard and whiteboards was lower as users were not sure how to use the Smartboard and users also wanted consumables like paper, markers and erasers to be provided.

Table 5: Rating of Collaborative Study Area

	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent	Good & Excellent	Response Total
Ambience	11.1%	15.6%	58.8%	14.5%	73.4%	289
Furniture	11.4%	12.5%	51.9%	24.2%	76.1%	289
Layout	7.3%	16.7%	62.9%	13.2%	76.0%	288
Smartboard	8.3%	35.1%	40.9%	15.6%	56.6%	288
Whiteboards	6.6%	31.3%	44.6%	17.4%	62.0%	287

We asked our users how they were using the CSA. From the responses in Table 6, we can see that the social interaction aspect was strong (52%) when we combine group discussion, group study and socialise. The use of the CSA for self study was 44% as reported by our users.

Table 6: Collaborative Study Area Use

Answer Options	Response %
Group Discussion	24.3
Group Study	23.0
Self Study	43.9
Socialise	4.8
Others	3.9
Total respondents	285

We also asked the students what improvements they would like to see at CSA. There were 180 comments, of which 51% was on furniture, 16% noise levels, 13% overcrowding, 11% usage of the space, 8% equipment and facilities.

Out of the 92 comments on furniture, 74% were positive in asking for more of such areas, more of such tables and seating. Some students suggested implementing booking of the open project spaces, control of usage, not allowing reservation, and many students reported difficulty in finding an available space in CSA. These comments though negative from the user perspective, meant that the space was heavily utilized by our users.

“Sweeping” the Library

An interesting survey of two public libraries in Canada was done using a “seating sweeps method” where users were observed and data collected on the type of user, their activities and location where the activities were carried out. They used the “seating sweeps method” to verify user responses in previous surveys. They found that their users were reading (51%–64%), writing (18%–24%), talking (12%–20%), and using the computer (13%-15%). (Given & Leckie, 2003, p. 381)

Table 7: Activities by Level in Li Ka Shing Library

Location	Number					Percent				
	L2	L3	L4	L5	Total	L2	L3	L4	L5	Total
No of users	2322	2052	2840	833	8047	28.86	25.50	35.29	10.35	
Reading	1016	567	958	326	2867	43.76	27.63	33.73	39.14	35.63
Writing	339	438	704	167	1648	14.60	21.35	24.79	20.05	20.48
Talking	183	179	235	47	644	7.88	8.72	8.27	5.64	8.00
Grp discussion	336	455	467	220	1478	14.47	22.17	16.44	26.41	18.37
Use computer	414	238	529	68	1249	17.83	11.60	18.63	8.16	15.52
Others	92	76	56	13	237	3.96	3.70	1.97	1.56	2.95

Table 8: Activities by Area in Li Ka Shing Library

Location	CSA	ROL	CSA%	ROL%	RatioCSA/ROL
No of users	412	7635	100	100	
Reading	113	2754	27.43	36.07	0.76
Writing	30	1618	7.28	21.19	0.34
Talking	25	619	6.07	8.11	0.75
Group discussion	183	1295	44.42	16.96	2.62
Use laptop/ computer	48	1344	11.65	17.60	0.66

CSA = Collaborative Study Area project space & ROL = Rest of Library

We decided to use the method to see and verify the activities our users were engaging in the library, with a special focus on the CSA. We conducted 2 “sweeps” a day over 6 days in the first two weeks of April 2008. Observations were staggered between 11:30am to 7:00pm over the 6 days. We defined talking as a conversation between two people and group discussion as a conversation between more than two people. Use of laptop and library computer was counted when the user was observed to be using it.

Looking at the data for the whole Library for each activity, we had similar results with Given & Leckie (2003). We found that our users were reading (36%), writing (20%), group discussion (18%), talking (8%), using the computer (16%). There were some differences in the activities pattern for the different levels. There was less talking on Level 5 which is our quietest area with more reading on Level 2 inside Course Reserves, on Level 5 and on Level 4 where we have carrels. There was more group discussion on Level 3, Level 4 and Level 5 where we have project rooms.

When we looked at the data for the CSA project space and the data for the rest of the library (ROL), we got a different picture. The major activity at CSA was group discussion (44%) which was 2.6 times more than the rest of the library as shown in Table 8.

We compared the “sweep” results in the CSA with the responses in the survey. There was a good match for group discussion and others, with over-reporting for self study and under-reporting by users for socializing or talking as see in Table 9.

Table 9: Use of CSA in Survey and Sweep

Survey Answer	Response %	Sweep Activities	Observed %
Group discussion & Group study	47.3	Group study	44.0
Self study	43.9	Reading & writing	34.7
Socialise	4.8	Talking	6.1

LKS Library as Event Space & Training Space

In line with our strategic plan, the Library places an emphasis on having events on its premises and conducting training classes. The number of events held and the number of training classes are among the key performance indicators of the Library.

Over the period August 2005 to April 2008, 91 events have been held at the Library with an average of 30 events a year. The types of events held were academic (40%), social (40%) and cultural (20%) in nature. Examples of each category were the International Research Conference and Open Space Technology Class for academic events, blood donation drive and student club annual dinner for social events, and photograph exhibition and book fair for cultural events.

The Library started a series of cultural talks in February 2008 with the inaugural talk by Catherine Lim who spoke on “That Dreaded F(reedom) Word” followed by T. Sasitharan who spoke on “Media Killed the Theatre Star” in March 2008.

The Library has a purpose-built training room that utilizes the SMU teaching technology of two project screens which can be “frozen” independently. The room is in high demand as a training space during semester by the Library, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Centre of Academic Computing and the Centre for Information Technology. In 2006 and 2007, the Training Room was booked by SMU staff for 587 hours and 540 hours respectively.

Table 10: Use of Reading Room and Training Room

Facility	Hours Booked for Events & Training		
	2007	2006	% change
Reading Area	458.0	392.5	116.7
Training Room	540.5	587.5	92.0
	998.5	980.0	101.9

Areas for Improvement

Based on the comments from our survey at Li Ka Shing Library, where 16% commented on the noise levels, we realize that we need to better designate the noisy zones in the Library with the furniture available and that we need to avoid having quiet areas right next to the noisy areas. There is mix of individual seats and group seating in the CSA. This has led to different expectations of noise levels by the users. The students at the individual tables want to do self study and were not happy with the noise made by the students having discussions at the open project spaces.

There were comments on over-crowding and difficulty in finding a space in CSA at peak periods (13%). We intend to rearrange our existing furniture during the vacation, to bring the casual group seating down to CSA and to move the individual seating to other levels. This would allow us to increase the project spaces in the CSA and meet the demand for more open group spaces.

With these proposed changes, our users could choose the area that best suits their

needs, whether solitary or social. “Communal activity in academic libraries is a solitary activity: it is studious, contemplative, and quiet. Social activity is a group activity: it is sometimes studious, not always contemplative, and certainly not quiet” (Gayton, 2008, p. 60). Segregating the two types of spaces would allow both types of activities to coexist in our Library and accommodate different user needs.

Conclusion

We saw that our students are using the Library for self study (56%) and group discussion (18%). This is a positive sign that independent study, serious conversations with other students, and participating in learning communities are the learning behaviors that our students engage in at our Library. We saw that our students have more group discussions and have more face-to-face interactions in the Collaborative Study Area.

This indicates that the furniture in the CSA is conducive to promoting group work and human interaction. We are meeting the needs of our students as their course work requires them to interact with one another and to work collaboratively. We are providing a congenial, inviting space in the Library that promotes social learning.

We saw that our Reading Room and Training Room were well-used for events and for instruction. This indicated that the Library brings in both academic and non-academic activities into our space and integrates us into the SMU community.

Salomon & Perkins (1998) argued that learning not only takes place in individual minds but as part of social process to deepen individual learning and collective learning. The library can serve as a place where such learning can happen. “A student can go to this place called the “library” and see it as a logical extension of the classroom. It is a place to access and explore with fellow students information in a variety of formats, analyze the information in a group discussion, and produce a publication or a presentation for the next day’s seminar” (Freeman, 2005, p. 4). In a conversation between the University Librarian and the Dean of Students, Associate Professor Low Aik Meng in August 2007, he commented that “Knowledge is transferred in different ways and this needs to be reflected in different spaces for the students. I find that the New Library (CSA) is a link between the classroom and the workplace.” The Li Ka Shing Library can serve as an extension of the classroom and also a link to the workplace, where our students would need to work independently and also in a team in open plan offices.

We see that we are well on our way of being a “social” academic library “bringing in non-traditional functions like classrooms, event programming, and cafes into the library” (Gayton, 2008, p. 62) and being a social learning space. As defined by Wenger (1998), learning as experience, learning as doing, learning as belonging and learning as becoming can take place in our library.

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