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Instruction and "The Commons"

Introduction

Many academic libraries have embraced the concept of the information commons or the learning commons. These library spaces consist of collections of tools, services and programs intended to enhance the student learning experience. According to Scott Bennett (2008), an information commons supports learning, while the learning commons "enacts" the institutional mission through partnerships with "academic units that establish learning goals for the institution (p. 183)." This article will use the term "commons" to refer to both types of environments.

In any type of commons, one is likely to find clusters of computers with academic software and multimedia resources, group study spaces, classrooms, reference services, and technology assistance. Libraries that have partnered with other campus units may have designated areas for writing centers, tutoring programs, centers for teaching and learning, or other departments. Commons environments can be quite expansive ranging from one or more floors of a library to entire buildings, and can set a tone for the library as a whole in terms of how service is provided. Instruction on information literacy and technology is often a component, but the type of instructional service varies from institution to institution. This article discusses examples of instructional services and learning spaces in several commons environments. While this article is in no way comprehensive, it is intended to offer ideas to those who are providing or planning to provide instructional services as part of a commons.

Learning Spaces

Commons environments provide an opportunity to build and develop learning spaces in new ways. While the commons as a whole can be seen as a learning space, special rooms and areas can allow for specific types of instructional activities.

In Fall 2007, Yale University's Bass Library underwent a renovation modeled on the learning commons concept. The Collaborative Learning Center (CLC) is located in Yale's Bass Library



(<http://clc.yale.edu/index.php>). While the entire library is considered a learning commons, most services are provided through the CLC. Facilities include eight group study rooms, where students can connect their laptops to plasma screens in order to play video games or collaboratively work on documents (B. Rockenbach, personal communication, April 7, 2009). These rooms are used heavily, especially in the evenings (B. Rockenbach, personal communication, May 19, 2009). [Photo on left: Group study room at Bass Library, Yale University Collaborative Learning Center (Credit: Michael Marsland/Yale University) (<http://clc.yale.edu/facilities/>)]

The CLC also features two teaching spaces. One is used primarily for library instruction, and the other is intended as a collaborative space to encourage faculty to provide innovative teaching. "Faculty use the room for a class or two if they want to do something with GIS, Google Maps, our tablet PCs, or other learning technologies," says Barbara Rockenbach, Director of Undergraduate & Library Research Education at Yale University Library (B. Rockenbach, personal communication, May 19, 2009).

The Learning Commons at North Carolina State University Libraries is designed to be comfortable both physically and mentally "so that students will stay for longer periods of time." The Learning Commons (LC) was designed by students and is considered an interactive student-focused space. The LC includes small group study rooms as well as presentation practice rooms. The presentation practice rooms are primarily available to students but are also used for formal teaching (J. Calvo, personal communication, May 14, 2009). [Photo on right: Presentation Practice Room at North Carolina State University Libraries (<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/learningcommons/images/presentationroom.jpg>)]



Hamilton College's Burke Library recently built a new classroom on the first floor, right behind the Information Commons. This classroom serves as a space for a variety of instructional purposes: reference librarians provide research assistance, drop-in sessions, and hands-on lab sessions, and Information Technology Services staff help students use multimedia presentation equipment. When the room is not in use, it serves as an open computer lab, "increasing the number of PCs available to students and extending the Information Commons space" (C. Carpan, personal communication, March 26, 2009).

Auraria Library in Denver, Colorado is in the planning stages of its learning commons. The library serves three schools - UC Denver, Metropolitan State College of Denver and Community College of Denver - and the student base includes many adult learners. Desired spaces include classrooms for



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traditional library instruction as well as special events, an informal space for individual or small group instruction/consulting on technology topics, and an area for computers with multimedia software (K. Sobel, personal communication, March 26, 2009).

Instructional Services

Commons environments allow library staff to provide formal and informal instruction in innovative ways, responding to needs of students and faculty. Services may range from planned sessions and workshops to on-the-fly instruction at the point of need.

Yale University's Collaborative Learning Center (CLC)

Instructional services in Yale's CLC support students in their information use as well as faculty in their teaching. The library's partners in the CLC include Information Technology and Services, The Graduate Teaching Center and The Center for Language Study. All of these entities are concerned with the process of teaching and learning.

The CLC supports instruction in a variety of ways (B. Rockenbach, personal communication, April 7, 2009):

- **Library as classroom:** According to Barbara Rockenbach, Director of Undergraduate & Library Research Education, the learning commons is not just for "finding information but for producing new knowledge." One goal is to exhibit the products of student work in the library. In spring 2009, the library planned to launch an exhibition on "New Haven and Urban Planning," highlighting student posters from an assignment where they prepared fictitious presentations for the New Haven City Council."
- **Course consultations:** CLC provides course consultations to help faculty integrate new technology, library collections, and new pedagogical techniques into classes. Consultation teams, coordinated by Rockenbach, consist of representatives of the CLC with expertise relevant to the professor's area (including a subject specialist librarian as well as representatives from the Graduate Teaching Center and instructional technology group).
- **Instructional sessions:** The Library's Research Education Program offers the series "Teaching with Technology Tuesdays" to faculty, graduate students and staff (<http://clc.yale.edu/events>). Sessions explore different tools that can be used in teaching (e.g., Facebook, blogs, wikis, Skype, etc.). Held in the CLC, these sessions have been popular and help to promote course consultations. Other activities include workshops on video editing, to assist in the use of video cameras, digital cameras and tripods loaned by the CLC, as well as a panel on digital humanities and virtual field trips in Second Life.

North Carolina State University Learning Commons

The Learning Commons at North Carolina State University (NCSU) is intended to support students in all stages of the research process – from conducting information searches to composing papers to citing sources.

Information literacy instruction is delivered informally in the Learning Commons. There are multiple opportunities to work with students, as they ask different questions at each stage of their work. Calvo "rooms the Commons" to look for cues that students need help; she is able to respond appropriately without appearing intrusive. When needs arise, Calvo initiates impromptu instruction sessions for individuals and groups. "Every moment is a teachable moment in the Learning Commons if you're watching body language," she says.

For example, many students come to the Learning Commons to work on the same chemistry assignment. When Calvo observes students congregating to use the print materials located there, Calvo pulls books off the shelves and works with the students as a group. Since the furniture in the Learning Commons is mobile, it is easy to arrange such a session by simply moving some chairs. In providing these impromptu sessions, Calvo is able to build strong interpersonal relationships with students (J. Calvo, personal communication, May 14, 2009).



[Photo above: Soft Seating Area at North Carolina State University Libraries (http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/renovation/images/lc_wilson_enlarged.jpg)]



Online Instruction and the Commons

Online instructional and communication tools can extend the mission of the commons beyond the physical space while at the same time draw users into the library.

The Undergraduate Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) has adopted the learning commons as an overall philosophy. Rudy Leon, UIUC's learning commons librarian, is currently developing non-classroom-based programming in information literacy and critical thinking. Her goal is to use the learning commons, a "non-disciplinary space," to "connect students with their intellectual lives through library resources."

As an example, the UIUC Undergraduate Library is using Twitter to share information on items of interest to students, such as study tips, links to library resources (e.g., gaming blog), and information on campus events. Posts are embedded on the Undergraduate Library home page as a Twitter stream, so students can view them there or directly through Twitter (<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl/index.php>) (R. Leon, personal communication, April 1, 2009).

In anticipation of its learning commons, Auraria Library is building up its online presence. This includes a new series of tutorials (<http://library.auraria.edu/tutorials>) and research guides using LibGuides (<http://guides.auraria.edu/index.php>). These tools are particularly important for reaching distance education students and part-time students. "Some students find that learning a little about library resources through a tutorial or class guide helps them build confidence to stop in the library or call a subject specialist," (K. Sobel, personal communication, March 26, 2009).

Conclusion

Commons environments provide an exciting opportunity to implement new instructional services, whether through formal classes, impromptu sessions, tutorials, study rooms, classrooms, or other solutions. If your library is developing a commons, perhaps the examples shared in this article will provide you with some ideas to help you design this space to meet the needs of your students and faculty.

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- Barbara Rockenbach, Director of Undergraduate & Library Research Education, Yale University Library
- Karen Sobel, Reference & Instruction Librarian, Auraria Library, University of Colorado, Denver

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About the Author

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