What is library space at Leeds Met?

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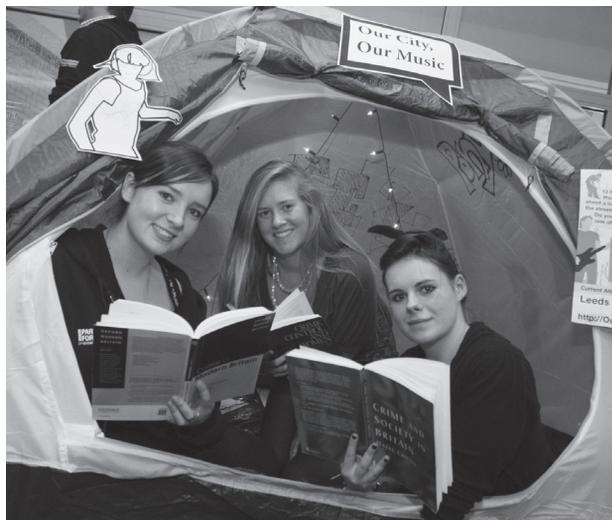
Introduction

The libraries at Leeds Met are fortunate to be at the heart of the University campuses, providing a unique combination of social, study, and secure space for students 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Reciprocal and collaborative learning have been shown to be effective ways of achieving learning outcomes, especially if the students engage in the process of choosing those outcomes (Baume, 2009). The libraries have been carefully designed and refurbished to be conducive to both group and individual work. Feedback from and observations of students encouraged Libraries & Learning Innovation "to provide library spaces for the way students actually work, not the way we think they ought to work" (Everest and Morris, 2008). As Bundy (2004) puts it, "It is not the space allocated to books which is critical; it is the space allocated to people".

Background

As more and more information can be accessed from home, do we really need physical library spaces any more? Barefoot (2006) found that some students thought the library irrelevant to their studies because of the increased online availability of resources. No doubt some lecturers feel the same way. What does the library offer and why do many people continue to visit the library in droves? Woodward (2009) states that visiting the physical library space is an 'experience'. It is more than simply seeking information or books.

For many students, the library can provide a safe haven or 'home', as they often have no room or office of their own on campus (as lecturers often have). The library can sometimes perform the function of being a surrogate or second home for students, somewhere for them to relax between lectures or meet friends, in addition to studying. And it doesn't have to cost them anything. It is socially acceptable to be alone in libraries, so students don't need to feel self-conscious. Lanfear (2008) emphasised the importance of "library space and ambience" in supporting the first-year experience at university as well.

It is not only students who enjoy the comfort of the libraries; lecturers can also often be seen working in the library, somewhere that they can have a welcome respite from the distractions and demands of the telephone and email. Even library staff make use of the silent study areas to focus on their work, uninterrupted.

Libraries at Leeds Met have wifi, a single help and information point, state-of-the art self-service machines, different types of study areas (including silent, group and informal) and a disability resource room. There are also comfortable chairs to accommodate social meetings. According to Barefoot (2006), offering coffee-making facilities would further enhance the ambience.

Bundy (2004) concurs with this and emphasises the role of libraries as "place" and "social and educational capital". Bundy sees academic libraries as "educational change agents". He also encourages varied and unexpected use of libraries, which is "the ultimate form of cooperation" (Bundy, 2004). For example, in the past year alone, at least five of the University's festivals have made use of library space, as well as three book launches and the annual Big Draw event. The Festival 'Under the Stars' in 2008 was probably the most innovative use of time as well as space, inviting students and staff to camp in tents overnight around a camp fire, while being entertained by bands, stilt walkers and acoustic guitars.

Flexible learning space

Library space has been an important issue under discussion for many years. Powell (2002) writes of the shift from teaching to learning and the important place that libraries hold in supporting students' learning in the higher education sector. Powell states that "the design of library space can ... either aid or impair the ability of students to achieve their academic potential" and that "academic libraries must cater for an increasing range of learning activities". Academic libraries also need to cater for a wide range of study preferences. Collaborative learning is more commonplace now in HE, as are group activities and assessments, and our library learning spaces need to be flexible and varied enough to accommodate these new ways of learning.

The recent refurbishment of a former 'classroom' in the library gave library staff the opportunity to put many of the above ideas into practice. Our approach was to have as little fixed furniture as possible and to harness the latest technology. The furniture is flexible and adaptable to enhance inclusivity. There are comfortable seats with coffee tables, office chairs on castors, and tables of different sizes and shapes that are easy to move around and arrange in a variety of ways. The library has to make its space work harder, which was achieved by ensuring that the classroom could be used for a number of purposes. The whole library is connected to the wireless network and students and staff can borrow wireless laptops to use in the room. The result is a "future-proofed, flexible, bold, creative, supportive and enterprising space" in line with Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) guidelines (2006). What was previously a traditional classroom is now a multi-purpose space where students can read, write, deliver presentations or use IT.

The classroom was designed with the future and change in mind. Library staff also use the room for teaching and delivering workshops. At the last University Staff Development Festival, library staff facilitated a workshop on developing library research skills for academic staff. They were able to divide the furniture into five work spaces, to permit small group working and competitions as well as tuition to a larger group. Three of the group facilitated the workshop as a team. It was a creative blend of traditional and high-tech methods of teaching, making full use of the multi-purpose functionality of the room.

Conclusion

The physical environment of the library provides a social as well as academic function that has proved popular with students, according to the National Student Survey results (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2009). The library has also recently been awarded the Government's Customer Service Excellence Award for its services. However, we are not perfect and continually seek to improve, so comments from users are welcomed. And, the next time you notice an event taking the place in the library, go along and see for yourself. We are most fortunate to have "an innovative library where, above all, the students come first" (Everest and Morris, 2008).

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