

Small Spaces, Small Budget, Big Results: Creating a User-centered Learning Space on a Budget

by Louise L. Lowe and Roylee Cummings

Introduction

Libraries face unprecedented challenges from unsuspected competitors. The Internet, coffee shops, restaurants and even homes are all invading the territory once exclusive to libraries. Bookstores are consciously attempting to recreate the library atmosphere, encouraging customers to linger (Coffman, 1998). As a result, patrons are abandoning libraries for more favorable environments. Library users are choosing plush recliners and the aroma of coffee over the squeaking of wooden tables and buzzing of fluorescent lights. They prefer the chatter of nearby collaboration over the shushing of librarians. Attend any library conference and you'll hear stories of reduced budgets, declining gate counts and decreased circulation of materials. One fact is clear: To retain current users and attract more, libraries must become places users want to be, not a means to an end.

Academic libraries must avoid complacency and readjust to meet the changing needs of their students. The Web has made it necessary for libraries to shed their stodgy images and utilize creative methods to attract users (Dworkin, 2001). Nontraditional factors such as the availability of food and drink,

comfortable chairs, and furniture that supports a variety of learning activities are popular and important aspects of modern learning spaces (Brown & Long, 2006). This has forced libraries all over the country to embark upon multimillion-dollar redesigns to create flexible learning spaces that can be manipulated to meet the different needs, learning styles and research activities of students.

So how can smaller academic libraries with limited resources keep up with evolving needs? Be creative. As a smaller library serving less than 2,000 students, the Swilley Library located on Mercer University's Atlanta campus did not have a lot of money available for a major renovation. However, through research, careful planning and savvy execution, we were able to create a well-received learning space with only a small budget.

Needs Assessment

Today, students desire user-centered facilities that encourage learner participation and social engagement (Brown & Long, 2006). But what does it really mean to be a user-centered library? A user-centered library focuses on the users' information and communication needs and makes planning, operations, management and service

decisions based on these needs (Wilson & Arp, 1995). In other words, user-centered means the needs, wants and limitations of the end-user are given extensive attention at each stage of the process. Considering this, we must ask ourselves, "Are we really user-centered, or do we continue to exercise the 'we know what's best for our user' attitude?" Don't think you know what they want. Employ a user-centered approach when it is time to begin a redesign or construction project.

To better understand our users' needs and increase their satisfaction, we conducted a user study via an online open-ended survey. We wanted the results to be unfiltered and unaffected, so we didn't include any leading questions. We also held two affinity focus groups around the same time. The study results showed that space is important to our library users. Students simply want to be comfortable while they study, which includes being able to eat and drink in the library. Armed with user comments and feedback, the library began to revise old services and implement new projects based on user-driven goals. One of the first projects the Library wanted to tackle was creating a more relaxed space for study and collaboration.

Research and Planning

Don't reinvent the wheel

Our purpose was not to conduct scientific research. We wanted to learn practical and effective ideas for creating a user-centered library space. To do this, we visited four Atlanta-area colleges/universities: Georgia State University, Agnes Scott College, Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech), and Emory University. Our goal was to better understand how these libraries and information services units were utilizing their spaces to support collaborative user-centered learning. During our visits, we spoke to library staff to get their impressions of how students used library spaces and to get firsthand accounts of which ideas worked and which ones didn't.

No matter how large or small the project, there were common themes and concepts present in all four libraries. Many were inexpensive and required only an open mind and the willingness to abandon library norms. Here are some of the major aspects we noted.

- Incorporate flexibility into the design, which allows students to move furniture as needed. Student needs will change, and what you decide now can change within the next five years.
- Allow fluidity. Don't become annoyed when students move furniture around to meet their needs. Moreover, don't become aggravated when they don't put furniture back like they found it. And by all means, don't become irate when you return to work the next day only to find the chairs you straightened the night before are out of order. Since different students have different needs, furniture will stay in a state of flux.
- Provide lots of natural lighting and consider different lighting options. Requirements differ depending on task and use of space (e.g.,

presentation or task lighting).

- Provide plenty of electrical outlets and network drops. These allow students to move around freely while still being able to connect to electricity and networks.
- Remind users that they are in the library by making task lighting, books, etc. readily available. This helps preserve a communal learning environment, and after all, we are still a library.
- If possible, showcase student work or art. This personal touch can help students feel the space is theirs.
- Let them talk. Students learn from each other as well as the professor, and learning can be enhanced, deepened and made more meaningful through interactivity and social engagement (Brown & Long, 2006). Besides, noise doesn't seem to bother other students as much as it bothers library staff.

What's happening at home?

Some of our most effective research was done in our own facility. We simply watched how our students used the library. Here are some of the observations that were made during a typical day.

- Students constantly moved chairs around so they could collaborate in library common areas.
- Students would sneak food into the library. This was evidenced by wrappings, cups and containers left behind.
- Noise didn't bother other students. Students appeared to be fine with nearby collaborating.
- Students seemed uncomfortable with furniture setup. They would often drag benches near chairs and position chairs front-to-front so they could recline while reading.

Implementation

As stated earlier, we had a relatively small budget with which to complete our project, so we had to be creative.

We also wanted to be as environmentally responsible as possible, which wasn't as expensive as we assumed. Here are some of the ways we accomplished different tasks at minimum cost.

Reuse furniture

We purchased a gently used sofa, oversized chairs and tables from a local rental clearance center. They were previously used to stage homes for real estate agents and were in great condition. This allowed us to purchase comfortable furniture for a fraction of what we would have paid for new furniture.

Reuse more furniture

Repurpose what you already have on hand. Instead of purchasing new chairs, we used some that were idle in other places of the library. Since we no longer use index tables, we upholstered the stools and scattered them around the library. Now, students use them when collaborating at computer workstations. (If you are wondering what happened to the actual index tables, we reused the wood to build bar-height tables for public computers and quick reference.)

Move things around

One of the easiest ways to freshen-up an area is by rearranging furniture. It's free and only requires creativity and muscle. Plus, staff members have an opportunity to collaborate and bond while deciding which pieces to move and where.

Do it yourself

Libraries often employ talented and creative people with a variety of interests. Why not use this talent to improve your library and make students happy? Staff worked together to figure out which items would be in the new area. We also used interior design catalogs and floor plans from office furniture vendors to determine the arrangement of furniture. Instead of hiring costly interior decorators, staff

members with a knack for colors, fabrics and décor handled the aesthetics of the area. They used color swatches to choose paint and went to local department stores to select decor.

We purchased “assemble-it-yourself” furniture and used personal vehicles to pick up the merchandise, typically on the way to work or during lunch. Our more mechanically inclined staff assembled study tables and cabinets. They were also responsible for arranging repurposed chairs in the new study area and relocating tables to other places in the library. By using staff talents, we were able to save money, boost staff morale and work together outside of our usual capacities.

Add some color

Another quick, easy and cost-effective way to liven up a space is to paint. Since most libraries aren't known for their exciting paint jobs, this can be a good way to make an area stand out. In keeping with our environmentally friendly initiative, we requested that our contractors use low VOC (volatile organic compound) paint. Also, consider purchasing decorative pillows. It is another easy and simple way to add color and life to an area.

Go functional, not fancy

We learned that students value functional spaces that are conducive to individual and group work, so be sure to select lightweight and moveable furniture that will allow them to create personalized spaces. We could have spent more money for more attractive items, but we were more concerned with meeting the need for furniture that could be easily moved. Students don't seem to mind the trade-off.

Let them eat cake ... and drink coffee

Students also said they wanted to eat drink while they studied, so we

relaxed our food and drink policy and allowed them to bring library friendly snacks and beverages into the area. This approach satisfied students by giving them a comfortable place to eat, drink and study. Library administration was happy because most of the library remained food-free.

Although we could not afford a full-service coffee shop, we were able to provide a single-cup gourmet coffee vending machine. We offered free coffee for the first three days and let students choose the flavors. Best of all, we were able to provide biodegradable cups and still keep the cost to a dollar a cup.

Evaluation and Feedback

After conducting the user study, we wanted users to know that their opinions really mattered. Once we analyzed the results, we posted a “Swilley Do List” in the middle of the library. As we complete projects, we check them off. It is a simple way to show users that we are committed to making the library a place that cares about their needs.

The library director also personally addressed the user study in an episode of the library's podcast, “Talking Points.” In the episode, she explained to students why we were not able to do some of the things they wanted to see in the library. She also assured students that their needs are a priority and made a commitment to work diligently with other campus administrators to fulfill their needs.

Once the space was completed, users naturally migrated to the new space. We placed feedback logs in the area which provided users an opportunity to quickly express their thoughts. The majority of the comments

suggested that space improvements were a success. The area is very popular and students are already requesting more seating!

The most valuable feedback, however, is what we observe on a typical day in the new lounge area: students clustered together or sitting alone quietly, a passer-by who pauses to catch the latest headlines on the new TV, a student curled up in an oversized chair reading notes, the sound of brewing coffee or a sea of laptops and users. Seeing students actively using the space proves that we have met some of their needs.

Reflections: What We Learned

“While it is tempting to mimic space solutions delivered by other libraries, such appropriations circumvent staff-owned discovery processes that create a deep understanding of what is being built. The best implementations of informal learning spaces are ‘home grown,’ reflecting deep understanding of populations being served” (Stuart & Association of Research Libraries., 2008).

Planning and creating a user-centered space in an academic library on a small budget are certainly daunting tasks, but they are not impossible. Some of the stress involved can be alleviated by simply asking students what they want. Of course some will ask for changes that require more money, time and resources than are available. But many want simple things that require minimal resources, but a lot of creativity, to implement. Here's what we learned (in no particular order):

- Reach out to your students to find what they want and need. Many want to know that you care about their needs, and most are willing to tell you what you need to know to meet those needs.



- Don't forget about the real beneficiaries of the project during the process: your students. You might not like many, or any, of the ideas they suggest, but if the changes will improve their learning experience, consider them.
- Learn from other libraries. The knowledge they share isn't limited to only their users. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Many are eager to share what they know.
- Keep as many tasks as possible in-house. Unless you're a large university with a multimillion-dollar budget, you can't afford to outsource everything. Many staff members don't mind showing they are experts at something non-library-related.

There is no doubt that this space filled a need in our library and enhanced our students' learning experience. This process has also made an impact on how our staff thinks about customer service, reminding us that we are here because the students are here. Most importantly, we learned that if you look to your users for answers, you'll find that their needs might be a little easier to meet than expected. ►►

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The new Hamilton Mill branch will be Gwinnett County's first "green" library. (Photo courtesy of Precision Planning Inc.)

Gwinnett County Library System begins construction of first 'green' facility

Gwinnett County and Gwinnett County Public Library officials held a groundbreaking ceremony in Lawrenceville on Oct. 21 to kick off construction of the Hamilton Mill branch of the Gwinnett County Public Library System.

Located on a five-acre site at 3690 Braselton Highway adjacent to the new Duncan Creek Park, the Hamilton Mill branch will be the county's 15th library branch. Precision Planning Inc. of Lawrenceville designed the 20,000-square-foot building to meet Silver LEED energy efficiency and sustainability standards, making it the first green library in the county and third in the state. Some of the environmentally friendly design elements include a pervious parking lot, recycled brick and an irrigation system that will use storm-water runoff.

The building will also include an "Art in Architecture" feature consisting of specially designed window glass depicting themes of water, earth, sun and the use of language in our culture, designed by Atlanta artist and sculptor Maria Artemis. It will offer up to 75,000 books and other items for checkout, including adult, teen and children's print and online collections.

Garrard Construction Group is constructing the \$7.4 million facility, which will open in the winter of 2010. The 2005 SPLOST will fund \$5.4 million of the total cost, and the rest of the funding will be provided by a state grant through the Georgia Public Library Service. ►►

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