

Libraries should not exist any more

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Before the 'World Wide Web' for a few became 'being online' for everyone, we used to go to the library for many reasons. Before Google, before Siri, before smartphones, before apps that help you sleep because you spend too much time on the very device on which the app has been installed, when handles meant something you literally twist and turn and when the news cycle was blissfully paced ... we had libraries.

We needed to ask a question, we needed the latest research, we needed advice on which book to read next ... or perhaps we just needed a safe, comfortable space. Whatever world we needed to enter, it was there. Whatever thinker from the past we needed, simply conjure them from the pages of their writing.

It was the place we housed our thoughts, our dreams, our selves.

But now, as has been said ad nauseam, we can do everything we need to with information in the palm of our hands. We can access every piece of information ever produced, at our whim (and battery life). We are told by algorithms what to read, watch,

eat, wear, see, do, say and everything we do we share so that we are all 'connected'.

In this frothing, seething ocean of information, who needs a library?

Well, everyone. You see, libraries make us better. We evolve as a species because we stand on the shoulders of giants and in a library those giants can live forever.

The library is not the ocean, it's the rescue ship that can navigate its way through the roughest seas to help people find their way safely.

We still have the same mission as we did 100, 1000, or 10,000 years ago. To house our

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thoughts, our dreams and ourselves, so that those today and tomorrow may benefit from the information that librarians transform into wisdom. The ocean may now be so large we can't even navigate its entirety and the boat we use may have a rescue helicopter, multiple motors and GPS, but the mission stays true.

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The Arthur Holt Library as a learning space

When 'new libraries' are discussed, it seems often to be in the context of new physical designs.

Much new thinking and research has been done into 'learning spaces' in the last decade. Without delving too deeply into the past and current realities of educational facility design, it was rare in the second half of the 20th century to see a systematic approach to learning-centred design. Bums-on-seats-in-a-room-with-one-teacher was the order of the day due to massive population growth in many developed countries, paired with an

increasing desire for more of the population to gain higher and higher qualifications as they left formal schooling.

An obvious exception to this can be seen with the 'progressive' schools based on the life and work of Maria Montessori, John Dewey and Rudolph Steiner (amongst others) who sought to establish a strong focus on enhancing the learner's lived experience of school, with the buildings



and landscape shaped to this end. Thanks to the research mentioned above, including much being done in Australia through groups like the Learning Environments applied Research Network (LEaRN) at the University of Melbourne, we are better able to identify the ways in which people, space and purpose interact to support great learning experiences and boost learning outcomes.

In the Arthur Holt Library (AHL), we strive to ensure all our visitors have the best experience possible. Whether they be students visiting during lunchtime, scheduled or unscheduled classes, for major events or small reading groups, all our visitors enter a place where the people, the services, the collection and the space itself support great learning.

We are incredibly lucky to have a purpose-built, well-maintained facility for reading, research and learning. We are able to identify several affordances that our spaces provide to learners and teachers, which would not be present in a traditional design. Indeed, they were not present in the design that existed before the AHL's most recent renovation.

But, for all our efforts and planning and creativity and collaboration, how do we

really know that what we provide is what our visitors need, or even what they want?

We asked them.

However, we didn't want to use yet another summative survey where many colleagues and students report feedback fatigue.

The AHL Student Experience (SX) Project

To help inform our thinking, we have utilised three data collection tools: staggered observations, the Ratelt system, and a Learnometer. The evidence collected from these elements formed the basis of our Student Experience (SX) Project (though we included other types of visitors as well).

Our staggered observations occurred when Library staff took 20 minutes at different times on different days to observe the use of our Library spaces over a period of one month of term time. By using structured note-taking, we were able to see similarities and differences in behaviours over time, without needing to intervene or interrupt visitors' experiences. Notes were categorised as:

Activity — behaviours seen (for example, 'student reading individually')

Environment — settings used (for example, 'Seminar Space')

Interaction — actions observed between users (for example, 'active conversation over a piece of work, collaborative dialogue assisting students to achieve their goal')

Object — object(s) used or ignored (for example, a piece of furniture)

User — types of people (for example, Year 7 students)



Gathering these notes gave the team deep insight into the ways in which our students actually use our spaces and facilities, how they interact with each other and with us, and potential opportunities for innovation and change.

Our use of a device and service normally used by retail gave an interesting perspective, compared to our usual method of simply having informal conversations with students. Housed in a tablet located at the front of the Library, close to a busy thoroughfare, the Ratelt app asked visitors to indicate how they feel about their library experience, then allowed visitors to answer a simple set of questions to indicate the reasons for their choice.

The 'high-level' data showed that most visitors were happy with their experience and could articulate reasons for it. Digging down revealed that whilst we pride ourselves on being an open, flexible and active space, a noticeable number of students found this distracting and a hindrance to their individual work during busy times. For students to take the time to comment on this specific reason indicates that it is of high concern, though low in frequency and quantity.

Finally, our use of a Learnometer device has proved critical in our understanding of the environmental factors that may be affecting our visitors' experience.

The Learnometer is an invention of a team of researchers led by Professor Stephen Heppell, and measures levels of sound, light, CO₂, air pollution, humidity and air pressure. For each space that was measured, we were keen to see if any of the levels met or surpassed what the researchers indicate are unhelpful for learning.

Although we are lucky to have air conditioning and a very open design, we found that some spaces suffered from significant levels of CO₂ during periods of high use (the number of students usually meeting our maximum capacity for that space); other spaces were very bright at particular times of day but not so at others. Noise was another factor, though it never met or exceeded the levels indicated as detrimental to learning.

Considering that we can have over 150 students in the Library at our busiest times, heightened noise and CO₂ levels did not come as a shock. However, the space has been designed to absorb or deflect noise as much as possible (even the collection itself acts as a buffer) so it was interesting to see the spikes occur and think about whether we need to intervene and, if so, how we would.

The AHL is an amazing space that can facilitate an incredibly diverse range of activities. Indeed, all aspects of the space have been chosen to support a flexible and adaptable approach to learning and teaching: the modern design, the furnishings, the lighting, the zoning of space, the designation of quiet zones, and more. As mentioned above, the affordances provided to learners and teachers when using the different zones within our space offer great potential for different types of learning experiences.

When analysing the data collected in the SX Experience Project, it was clear that whilst the space is highly conducive to learning, it is also extremely important for us to know that in certain conditions even this space can be less-than-ideal and we should build the understanding within our own team and across the school as to when using a space is and is not appropriate. Most importantly,

it highlighted the need to have ongoing dialogue with our colleagues to support and guide them in using the space for better learning.

For the right reasons

We don't want to simply deploy strategies ad hoc or even strategies that 'work' but cause us to ignore our core business or unnecessarily damage other good work being done. The essential functions of a library still need to be actively engaged in order to fulfil our mission, regardless of what new and innovative practices may float through our collective consciousness.

Shifting the focus to the visitor experience makes our team highly aware of the ways in which we engage with them. We want our visitors to feel that this space is their space, that the collection is theirs, that our services are at their request. Naturally, part of this is pedagogical in nature as we are teaching our students how to communicate and participate in the experience of a shared space in a constructive and ethical way.

We want to provide an outstanding experience for all our visitors, with learning and teaching based on flexibility, innovation and collaboration. This does not mean catering to every whim and desire or request. It means listening and learning, thinking and researching, deploying strategies and reflecting and rethinking on a constant basis. Some call this disciplined innovation, or innovation for the right reasons.

Who we are

We've discussed elements of the AHL as a 'space', but what makes it a place is the people. People are important. People build relationships. The interactions people have at school also hold an innate pedagogic

element. As Max van Manen argues:

To be unresponsive to pedagogy could be termed the half-life state of modern educational theory and research which has forgotten its original vocation: that all theory and research were meant to orient us to pedagogy in our relations with children (van Manen 1990).

We are very lucky to have several staff in the AHL, a mix of library specialists and teachers from a range of subject area backgrounds. All our daily interactions are centred on the premise that we are here to serve and support learners and learning. Be this through our collaborations and conversations with colleagues, parents, or the students themselves, the work of those in the AHL can be threaded through the many seemingly innocuous and fleeting moments of connection between people.

Our library services specialists bring together a unique combination of passions, interests, skills and strengths so that we can actively engage in a huge array of projects that can be initiated by almost any part of the school.

The events we run

One key example was our recent facilitation of activities for Australian Science Week. The task put to the AHL was to facilitate a two-period session of 'activities' for Year 8 on a Wednesday afternoon and Year 7 on a Friday afternoon. Considering each year group is populated with over 220 students, we couldn't afford to wing it.

Through some rapid design thinking, testing and theoretical prototyping, we came up with a program of activities that centred around our core business whilst also building strong links to the world of science. Having

this as the bedrock of our thinking actually put useful constraints on our 'design' and let us focus more effectively on the types of experiences we would create.

We invited two authors to facilitate workshops: one engaged students in thinking about and writing science fiction; the other taught students how to 'read like a detective' using her own science fiction work. We also had guest presenters explore the galaxy using cutting-edge visualisation software and then help students physically get into formations of unfamiliar constellations. Another session involved presenters from OneGiantLeap Australia who hosted half a cohort of students and enthralled them with flight simulators, micro drone piloting and even a Mars rover. They also presented the books that inspired them to study and pursue their passions for science.

We had several other activities running in parallel, in order to break up larger groups so that they could fully engage in quieter tasks like staff-led reading.

By creating a series of experiences that linked a subject domain to our collection, our services and our people, we hope that our students feel more engaged with us and with their library. As one indicator of success, we had several boys who rarely visited the library appear much more often and much more engaged in the space, the collection and the people.

Reading culture

A timeless purpose of a library is to support and promote a positive and growth-oriented reading culture. The benefits of reading for pleasure have been proven overwhelmingly, especially in studies comparing people who do have access to books with support to



read and those who have neither (Evans *et al.* 2010). In particular, the astonishing growth that can occur during childhood and into young adulthood are stark.

During one of our professional learning days this year, we were lucky to have Dr Margaret Merga to lead our exploration of the research into reading culture in schools. Dr Merga is a world-leading researcher in the field and her advice was both challenging and practical. The team used her provocations to complete a literature scan and therefore identify several studies, articles, chapters and whole books relating to reading, reading culture, and school reading programs. This deep dive into the literature and popular commentary allowed us to become familiar with what we 'know' and what we think we know with regard to building and maintaining a positive reading culture.



Many schools are delivering excellent reading programs already and the AHL team has identified several strategies that we will adopt or adapt for our context. This is a crucial process of innovation: to not simply transplant one idea from one context to another and expect that it will work. There needs to be a cycle of innovation that allows for regular feedback, integration of that feedback into next steps, and ongoing critical reflection of the entire process.

It will be a long road — and perhaps there will be no final destination — but I strongly believe that the library is the best channel to build our students' skills, aptitudes and attitudes with regard to reading so that they become more aware, more talented and more active characters in the story of their world. Perhaps they'll even be a writer of it.

Libraries should evolve ... and they are

If you asked me to find out the orbital velocity of the moon, it's highly likely I'd either open up my laptop or smartphone, go straight to Google and look through the first few web links that come up to verify the number given to me.

Some people wouldn't even check beyond the answer first given by Google. Increasingly, people are asking Siri or another AI entity to do the work for us.

Libraries are much more than a physical collection of facts. A good library won't just house dead paper with ink tattoos but will inspire and welcome and cajole our bodies and minds to engage with reading and research in a way not possible in other places and spaces.

The purposeful fusion of digital technologies with non-digital resources, processes and places requires highly skilled, creative and engaged people to drive a change that will benefit visitors. Libraries should and are evolving to be new places of learning that cross boundaries between subjects, leap over silo walls and shine lights on areas of common approach and areas of difference.

Libraries prevent generational amnesia and enforce a sense of humility for the creative genius and human experience of others. When we stand on the shoulders of giants, we can see further and do more and be better than we otherwise would be. Libraries that expand our minds are an engine of democracy and a catalyst for justice.

If we design a library with humanity in mind, we won't just change the world. We'll shape it.

References

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