

Library practice and Information Commons understandings

By Anne Whisken

Introduction

My school is in the design phase of a \$20m learning and innovation space, with a library/ learning resources/ information centre on ground and basement of a three storey building.

In addition to finding good material on designing library learning spaces (I have a Scoop-It site Library Learning Spaces to assist that process) I am interested in particular to find good models of service and staff for the teams that support student learning and teaching practice as they use information to learn in the library.

Learning Commons and Information Commons (IC)

Learning Commons and areas fitting that description but with different names, are being built in many academic institutions at present, to cater for the more social learning style apparently preferred by tertiary students. Frequently, they sit adjacent to libraries to enable use of the traditional research collections and services, many including cafes (McMullen, 2008). Some exist quite separately. A broad sweep of the way such places seem to be used, managed and supported does not always reveal close integration with library services. There is not an obvious enhancement of the way information is used for learning – if anything, it seems to hint at a diminution of the role of library as providing expert information practice, or at least not a practical demonstration of evolution of library and information service into new ways of being. Assuredly, with digital collections taking over from physical book and journal collections, the necessity to be physically in a library has diminished and library teams are changing accordingly. But when building a new learning centre which will contain a library learning space, a model is needed which does provide study spaces that enhance use of information in the process of learning, innovation and creativity. It needs to provide a working environment where expert teams are on hand to work with students.

Our teaching practices should present libraries as more than a Bank of Sources, from which usable phrases can be withdrawn as needed. They should be workshops, labs, studios, or hacker spaces, where students engage with ideas and invent their own, through conversations with others interested in the same things.
(Fister, 2013)

By contrast, where Information Commons are referred to there seems to be a closer alignment with expert information practice and support. In such instances there are sometimes references to a management and support style which brings the expertise of Library and Information Science and ICT into carefully managed teams. (Information Commons, 2013, University of Sheffield). This understanding fits more closely with the ideas explored in Hay's iCentre concept (Lee & Hay, 2011).

How might we explore this idea of an Information Commons (IC) and the ways it enhances and evolves the library? What are the questions to ask to move our thinking and operations to new possibilities?

- **Information Commons** – the idea of having a particular location in or adjacent to the library where everyone comes to find, share, learn and use information for learning and knowledge creation, and the software and hardware used for that purpose. It is seen as complementary to the more specialist use of information for learning which occurs at deeper levels of research and learning, and which takes place in the library study spaces. The question might be asked: what would we call such a place? Information Commons (IC) has been used for some time in many academic institutions, and is one that seems for the most part to describe the functions of such a location. But would it be best for my locale?

- **Information Commons staffing** – the idea that the people who work in the IC have particular expertise to support a pre-determined matrix of key front-line information required by users, including knowing about where to refer people if needs are outside the expertise matrix. This expertise is either in addition to the deeper information expertise of librarians or is held by people who have deeper expertise in other areas such as traditional ICT software and hardware used for teaching and learning. Questions asked might include: how do we put together such a team? Who has that expertise? What would their job descriptions be?
- **Library staffing** – the idea that just as there are people equipped with the front-line skills and knowledge for IC style access and learning, so too are there people with more specialist expertise in research and use of information for learning, such as Librarians, Library Technicians and Teacher-Librarians. Questions asked might include: what are their roles in new library spaces which become more and more about managing digital collections and facilities where digital information is accessed and used for learning than about managing collections of books and journals. What will their job descriptions look like?
- **Information Commons staff spaces** – the idea that particular furniture and work space designs enable members of the team to provide best practice service. The question might be asked: what seems to be the ideas behind current designs, and are these designs also best for the specialist library staff?

Information Commons as a space and a service in application

I would see our Information Commons existing in the main traffic flow between senior school and middle school learning areas and a 'quad' that serves as large assembly, meeting and eating area for an adjacent cafeteria. The library learning areas would lead off from that IC. I would envisage that the IC team would be sited in work areas accessible from library, library team and IC team offices. This team would assist with access to and use of the online learning environment and its information architecture: eLearning hardware and software, information resources, learning management system, and the organisational and administration information and systems required for operating in a school. This team would be able to direct enquirers to the further specialist services provided by library reference personnel, teacher-librarians, eLearning teachers, and ICT services. Description of the Information Commons team is best done by describing its functions, then deciding on the job descriptions required for that function.

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Information Commons Function

To provide front line assistance with access to and use of

- eLearning - hardware
- eLearning - software and applications
- eLearning - learning management system
- library research and reading resources - location and circulation
- Innovation Centre spaces – use, support and bookings
- Administration software – student data, reporting, timetables
- Organisational information – student, teacher, parent portal intranet
- ICT systems support – ID, logins, print credits, printing

We want to develop an information commons concept that requires an entirely new frame of thinking by ICT and Library and eLearning for the new centre, with new job descriptions (Hay, 2012, iCentre). I can see for example, that teacher librarianship might need to take on more eLearning and instructional design responsibilities; some library technician profiles would need to move towards IC desk capacity; and some previously ICT profiles might be purely information commons service with increased awareness of eLearning and information resource.

Key stakeholders at our school involved in the design of our new centre visited The Hub at Adelaide University, operated by Information Services. Apart from paying close attention to the physical spaces created, we learnt

much from the process of determining the information services required, creating job descriptions and then selecting and intensively training a new team. By extensive consultation with the University community, a huge profile of information needs was established, then those reworked into a matrix of first and second order queries. That informed the team job profiles and training needs of those selected for the positions. An intensive and ongoing training program ensures that those staffing the service desks are well equipped to answer and refer students and staff. Continuous revision via careful data collection ensures user needs are met.

New Library Staffing Model – Questions and Answers

How and where do we site traditional library services and their associated staff in relation to new concepts such as an Information Commons which might sit in the forecourt of the Library?

- Answer: I want to maintain some of the library services, but want them to operate in tandem with a new service. I do not want library sitting as some left-over remnant - I want there to be a smooth flow between them.

How do I manage it so that hard copy materials are not hidden away, invisible from the main action areas, but at the same time maintain security of those materials? Do I want to maintain security of my hard copy materials?

- Answer: Yes, I do want to maintain management of the location and security of physical items, so that I know where they are to ensure best return on investment and best capacity to deliver items to my users when and where they want them.

What if the corollary of that is a situation of materials not being used?

- Answer: I need to provide a vibrant space that brings people deeper into a zone where multiple styles of learning can take place with multiple ways of accessing information.

So what staff models suit that operation?

- Answer: From the library perspective, IC team members would be able to provide assistance with searching the library online environment (Homepage and Management System) for location and circulation (eResources or hard copy). Deeper assistance needs would be referred to reference staff or teacher-librarians.

But is there still need to maintain a library assistance desk? Do we want to make people who want assistance with finding and borrowing to have to wait for the IC staff who might well be occupied with an intensive eLearning software session? Or do we expect the people on Reference to fulfil this function also?

- Answer: This is difficult when the Reference person is also responsible for study supervision over several flowing floor levels, and could be doing intensive reading promotion assistance.

Am I stuck in old models of service provision? How do I maintain existing services if my staff are also being intensively involved in the IC process? Can we roster to provide for Teacher-Librarian team work of information literacy and reading promotion, Reference, Library Desk, IC, plus all the eResources, acquisitions, cataloguing and end processing that currently occurs?

- Answer: Start now on data collection of time currently spent by those on Library Desk and Reference, and work out what could change in a new model.

Library and Information Commons staffing possibilities

Library Service Model

- One person always on Library Desk– circulations, library space bookings and doing IC in quiet periods, but calling for IC back-up when required

- One or more people always on Reference and space management – roving

Library Team

- IC: functions as above
- Reference – any library staff member: librarians, eResources Coordinator, library technicians, teacher-librarians
- Teacher-librarians
- eResources coordinator
- Technical Services – acquisitions, cataloguing, end processing, circulations, collection management, space management

Job Description enhancements

- Head of Library : Management of Library Staff and Programs, Information Commons Management Team, Teacher-Librarian
- Teacher-librarians: Information Literacy, eLearning, Reading promotion, Reference
- eResources coordinator: Home Page, Library management system interface, eResources cataloguing & circulation, Clickview management, data collection and reporting, Library Desk, IC, Reference
- Supervisor Technical Services:
- Collection and space management, team management, cataloguing, budget oversight, Reference
- Cataloguer: Cataloguing, End Processing, Loans, Library Desk, Information Commons, Reference
- Acquisitions: Acquisitions, Library Desk, Information Commons, Reference

Student involvement

Added into the staffing mix at many academic institutions is the idea of ‘rovers’, often university students, who bring their expertise as users of the system, with additional training, to provide dynamic, and often after-hours support to library users (Information Commons, 2013, University of Newcastle). Apple suggests taking their Genius Bar concept into school information centres where students join with staff to provide support teams. Certainly, a proactive library management would look at ways that it can integrate student experts into extending its service in a context which integrates library and information commons understandings.

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Exciting opportunities

At most school library conferences I attend these days there will be a passionate exhortation for school library staff to ‘seize the day’, to make the most of opportunities being presented to evolve the service and style of their expert information practice into new ways of learning being explored by educational institutions. I can see that use of Information Commons thinking gives me an additional frame of reference for an evolution of our expertise using the best from our understandings of library service and how it supports student use of information to learn.

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