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Community-Based Learning Environments: Looking Back on Five Years in the OCAD University Learning Zone

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Abstract

Now that constantly-evolving technology systems fulfill many of the tasks that used to occupy library staff, many academic and research libraries are exploring new ways to contribute to their institutions' learning communities. The OCAD University Library's Learning Zone is one of these experiments: an inclusive, open, creative space with the mission of enriching the student experience through collaborative, hands-on learning, meaningful extra-curricular programming, and useful training opportunities. This article examines the best practices and approaches Learning Zone staff have developed in the five years since the space launched.

Keywords

learning commons; library programming; community engagement

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Now that constantly-evolving technology systems fulfill many tasks that used to occupy library staff, many academic and research libraries are exploring new ways to contribute to their institutions' learning communities. The OCAD University Library's Learning Zone is one of these experiments: an inclusive, open, creative space with the mission of enriching the student experience through collaborative, hands-on learning, meaningful extra-curricular programming, and useful training opportunities. The guiding vision of the space is to create a place where students feel welcome and comfortable, where everyone can learn from each other organically and holistically. The OCAD U Learning Zone is part of a greater trend in academic libraries of creating engaging, dynamic, interdisciplinary spaces, often referred to as learning commons, for creation and discovery. These spaces match the evolving pace of technology; even if computer stations or equipment loans are available, most of the technology in the space belongs to the students and is updated by them.

The Learning Zone has helped to fill a need for interdisciplinary, informal community spaces on campus where students can engage in unstructured learning and make connections with other students and faculty that will support them through the challenges of academic life. Lacking an on-campus residence, OCAD University has a

large population of commuting students who, as a result, often miss out on opportunities for the types of informal engagement that enrich their learning experience.

Inspired by the Learning Zone at the University of Arts London, the OCAD University Learning Zone has grown and developed into a vibrant and popular community space on campus in the five years since its inception. Following are some best practices that the Learning Zone staff have developed in our time facilitating and supporting programming in this unique space.

Collaborate, Don't Duplicate

A challenge at OCAD University, also prevalent in many institutions, is remaining connected and informed about the activities of other departments. Many student services have overlapping or aligned goals for supporting students. Identifying common interests and banding together adds strength to these enterprises. Events and ideas become richer when more heads are committed to their success; outreach is broader with the communication resources of multiple departments (newsletters, email lists, and social media accounts); the effects of budget cutbacks can be ameliorated by drawing on multiple budgets from other partners involved.

Making connections with other departments can be difficult if there is no pre-existing relationship. Depending on the size and culture of your institution, forging relationships can be as easy as visiting different departments and introducing yourself and your intentions. If time and distance make this approach impractical, allies can be found in other ways. Attend as many interdepartmental events as possible (staff or faculty training, events run by other departments, union meetings); perform research to identify staff in other departments with similar roles or goals, and invite them to meet and discuss potential partnerships. Collaboration can be infectious, especially when other departments can see the benefit and success of your initiatives. Many of our collaborative events started as partnerships with one department and have turned into multi-departmental, multi-faculty initiatives. For example, last spring's Food=Need event, which focused on food security, featured a film screening, a panel discussion, a screen printing workshop, and an art exhibition. Food=Need was a collaboration between the Library, the Faculty of Art, the Faculty of Design, the Office of Diversity, Equity & Sustainability Initiatives, the Student Union, and Grad Studies.

Say Yes

The management of a community space reaches a point where decisions about the space and the definition of its purpose shift from a top-down hierarchy toward a distributed community model. This shift can be unsettling for facilitators who may be accustomed to their own authority, but a community space will never find success if its members and users do not develop a sense of belonging and ownership. The best way to encourage this development is to say yes, within the boundaries of reason, to any idea or project that is presented to you. In the Learning Zone there have been countless instances of individuals approaching us to propose an activity or event that we would

never have conceived of, and I can count on one hand the number of ideas that we have turned away. End of term karaoke? Sure. A professional practice conference? Why not. A student-led exhibition? Definitely. An indoor garden prototype? Let us know how we can help.

Librarians are natural problem solvers; many of us thrive when presented with an intellectual challenge. How many times have you been approached with a reference question completely beyond your knowledge and understanding? It happens a lot! Good librarians will not let themselves be stopped by a lack of knowledge; they will jump into the fray and use their resources and the asker's knowledge to navigate toward a successful outcome. This same approach can be applied to community building. We may not always know what is possible, but if we say yes to the quest, we take the first step on the road to discovering what we, and our greater community, are capable of. The great thing about this approach is that, over time, like collaborative ventures, you develop a reputation for saying yes and will be approached with exciting ideas that further enrich your learning commons.

Know Your Limits

Openness to a broad range of activities is vital, but it must be tempered to some extent with reason and common sense. The mission statement of the Learning Zone is broad enough to encompass a huge range of activities, but it also works as a litmus test for what kind of activities we can support. Each space will have its own limitations; familiarizing ourselves with these limitations will help us determine what can be accomplished, when, and how. Collecting usage and attendance statistics can be very helpful in this regard. Quantitative information, such as knowing our seating and standing capacity, daily gate counts and periodic head counts, helps me decide when to schedule events for the benefit of participants and other users of the space. The Learning Zone is a multi-purpose space. Between planned events, the Learning Zone functions as a place for students to study and write, work on non-toxic studio projects, meet with peers for group projects, chat with a professor, eat their lunch, or spend a quiet moment unwinding between classes. These are all important activities for which to provide space, and we are always mindful of the need for this support when scheduling events. A drop-in service, such as the Financial Aid and IT workshops we host, will work well when the space is full of students who might want to participate; a more intimate event, such as a Zine Library visit from a class, may work better during our calmer hours.

Invest in Others

Facilitators should know their limits. In my first years as the Learning Zone Librarian, I did not hesitate to work overtime to oversee an evening event or to come in on the weekend to help students develop an indoor gardening project. Quite predictably, I became burnt out several times and started to feel very resentful towards my otherwise great job. After two years, I took a step back and re-evaluated my approach. No one benefits from a community space that hinges on the efforts of one person. You can't get

further away from the definition of community! Rather than bearing all responsibilities on your shoulders, channel your efforts into empowering and enabling others to support your community space. Share your insights, create clear process documents that others can use as guides, and take the risk of trusting others. Even if mistakes are made, they are learning opportunities that will help you identify gaps in the information and establish guides you can provide to users of the space to prevent further mishaps.

Learning commons spaces like the Learning Zone are commonly perceived as Makerspaces: locations full of flexible, new technology like 3D printers and microcontrollers. While new technology is certainly a useful and interesting component of these types of environments, no investment in technology will be as valuable as an investment in people. Clearing a library space of bookshelves and replacing them with modern modular furniture and ample Wi-Fi is not enough. Open spaces too easily become dead spaces. A successful learning commons needs a staff dedicated to activating it: generating opportunities for interaction, intersection, discovery and critique, and refining their approach based on experience and feedback. Every September, we put a lot of effort into hiring a truly excellent staff for the Learning Zone; we focus on finding individuals with positive attitudes, enthusiasm for problem solving, and an aptitude for thinking on their feet.

Make Friends with Failure

For every activity that garnered appreciative feedback from students, we have hosted an event with a terrible turnout. This is the simple reality of producing non-curricular activities for students who are already overwhelmed by the time requirements of their coursework (at OCAD U, this includes traditional essays and group presentations as well as time-intensive studio work) and necessary employment, not to speak of time for socializing, family, and self-care. Rather than dwelling on or, worse, ignoring failed initiatives, we have looked at each one with a critical eye to gauge what elements did not work and how these failures could be avoided in the future. We have learned that even if students are theoretically interested in your event, they will not commit their precious time to it unless they can identify an obvious benefit to themselves. Clearly expressing these deliverables in your promotion can be helpful in drawing students to events. We have also learned not to force programming where (or when) it does not fit, such as at the end of the semester or during the summer. No matter how useful or interesting our workshop on Visual Plagiarism may be, it can never compete with the urgency of exam prep or the glory of sitting in the park with friends on a summer day between classes. Focus your energies where they will be most successful, and use down times to record and reflect on your previous work.

The Value of Community Building

Many first-time visitors and users are surprised to discover that the Learning Zone is an OCAD U Library initiative. Our approach to community engagement, par for the course in public libraries, has not been the standard fare of academic libraries. Whatever the process or program, supporting the curriculum and the research activities of the learning

institution are the primary motivations of most campus libraries. While these are noble and important goals that should continue to be supported, great value also lies in fostering learning opportunities outside of coursework and formal research activities. In the five years since the Learning Zone was launched, we have seen firsthand that the library can offer a lot to its learning community through providing an alternative community-based learning environment.

Visit the Learning Zone blog to read about our past and future initiatives:

<http://blog.ocad.ca/wordpress/learningzone/>

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