If You Build It, They Will Come: An Intra-Institutional User Engagement Process in the Learning Commons

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Introduction

The higher education in Hong Kong was to launch the four-year New Academic Structure with diversified curriculum in fall 2012. While all government funded universities embarked in capital projects to prepare for the increase in student bodies, most academic libraries were busily involved in re-purposing their spaces to enrich learning experiences. The *Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) Library* has completed a Building Extension and the Learning Commons in 2011 and 2012 respectively. Using the Learning Commons as a case study, this paper reveals a number of insights on how to effectively engage different user groups within the university, partly helping to transform the Library into a more effective user platform. After a brief description of the facility, the paper focuses on the user-group engagement process, highlighting the promotion plan and factors that enhance the user-group engagement; and discusses two positive outcomes of the engagement.

Features of the HKUST Learning Commons

The Learning Commons at HKUST is located on one floor (Lower Ground 1) of the Lee Shau Kee Library Building, spanning an area of 1,800 square meters. It composes of 5 zones: Group Study Zone, Open Study Zone, Refreshment Zone, Teaching Zone and the Creative Media Zone. Together they provide over 600 seats of various kinds. A major design element is that the space can operate independently from the rest of the Library, making it a 24-hour capable facility. With its central location on campus, user-friendly space, facilities and services, and long service hours, the Learning Commons has quickly become one of the favorite study spaces since it opened in February 2012.

The strength of a Learning Commons “lies in the relationships it supports, whether these are student-to-student, student-to-faculty, student-to-staff, student-to-equipment, or student-to-information,” (Lippincott and Greenwell 2011) through cutting-edge, learner-based technologies. Accordingly, the HKUST Learning Commons steps up to be an active facilitator of learning, a hub that supports collaborations and interactions among users and user-groups within the university. As pedagogy at the university moves towards team project, multimedia work and whole-person development, the Learning Commons accommodates this new learning landscape by incorporating the following features that differentiate the facility from traditional library space.

Location and Service Hours

The HKUST Library is located at the heart of the campus. The Learning Commons is highly visible and accessible. In most of the semester weeks, it is open up to 22 hours daily.

Variety of Spaces and Furniture

The Learning Commons provides a variety of spaces and furniture for different user needs and activities across various academic and service units. The Open Study Area is an energetic study space, while the Group Study Rooms are enclosed space for group work. On the other hand, the Refreshment Zone has a more relaxing and vibrant air. Different learning atmospheres are created by deliberate use of furniture. In particular, the sofa and coffee tables in the Refreshment Zone provides a distinctive, socially active and friendly air; while some study corners maintain the ambience of quiet, focused study by the arrangement of furniture that discourages group study.

Flexibility in Space Use

“[F]lexibility is one of the most desirable characteristics in a space – furniture that moves and acoustic and visual separations that allow collaboration” (Grummon 2009). This is achieved in the HKUST Learning Commons via modular tables and the use of partition. The Tutorial Spaces can be used as three separate spaces with partitions in between, or one bigger venue when combined. All tables and chairs in the Tutorial Spaces are easily movable for easy rearrangement. The two E-Learning Classrooms are also divided by partition; providing the capability for a combined setting for large class with 74 computers.

Technology That Supports Learning

The technology at the Learning Commons focuses on supporting collaborative learning, e-learning, media creation and production. Big screens (LCD TVs or interactive projectors) are available for presentation and group sharing. A touch screen PC is used at the Idea Corner to encourage impromptu sessions, brainstorming and ideas capturing. The Creative Media Zone provides a rich array of facilities supporting media production and editing. They include video cameras, studio lighting, 3D projector, sound system, video and audio mixer.

In the two E-Learning Classrooms, multiple projectors and audio systems facilitate teaching that is rich in digital content. All computers in the classrooms are equipped with media editing software to support media literacy teaching. The Personal Response System (PRS) is installed to facilitate interactivity in classes. Remote Video Capture system is also in place so that classes can be recorded and made available online. A set of videoconferencing equipment is available for HKUST community to collaborate with, teach and learn from people beyond the campus.

Integrated Student Services Hub

In the design phase, it was recognized that the Learning Commons is the central venue of information literacy teaching and other learning support services. The Library partners with the Publishing Technology Center (PTC), who established its presence at the Learning Commons by operating the Creative Media Zone. They bring in expertise

and services in multimedia production, supporting students in curricular as well as extracurricular learning. PTC also connects the Learning Commons with professionals in the area of photography, graphics design, and other media areas; these connections enrich the types of activities in the Learning Commons.

The Career Center is another active service provider at the Learning Commons. Career counsellors frequently use the space to reach students for career development, interview skills and job interviews. In Fall 2012, a number of teaching departments also started establishing student services at the Learning Commons.

Redeployed Staff

To support the development and operation of the Learning Commons, the Library mobilizes human resources from all levels in the existing library staff. Two new working groups were formed to handle issues at administrative level and operation level respectively.

In order to provide front line service, which involves two service points, the Library had major staff redeployment and retraining. All paraprofessionals at Technical Services are involved in serving at the new Learning Commons Information Desk. Training started two months before the Learning Commons open, and remains a continuous effort.

Learning Commons Provides the Opportunity for User Engagement

It is a library's core mission to provide a pleasant, quiet and comfortable place for research and study. Academic libraries have fulfilled this mission in past decades. In this digital age, however, the library as a place for research and study is being challenged in three ways:

1. Decline in physical visits to libraries

Students and faculty members may not need to physically visit the Library to find information and do research. Users can access e-journals, e-books, databases and internet resources remotely using laptops and mobile devices. Faculty members and researchers often comment that they do not need to come to the Library any more.

2. Low perception of libraries and librarians

As libraries purchase many current titles in electronic format, bookshelves are left with books of imprint dates mostly a decade ago. Users are often turned away when browsing shelves with old titles. Old library buildings cramped with dated books are no longer appealing to users, who regard the library as a repository of old print books of little value to them. Without seeing the behind-the-scene work in which library staff select, acquire, classify and make electronic resources seamlessly accessible to eligible users anywhere anytime, users generally think that information is readily available on the web. The role of a library providing information and knowledge has been greatly played down. It is important to let users know the intermediary roles of libraries – as information buyer, organizer and deliverer.

3. Change in learning styles

Libraries provide physical place for study. Whether individual study or group study, quiet study or noisy discussion, libraries offer a mixture of spaces to fulfill users' different needs. However the net-generation has a different learning and study behavior. While studying, they like to listen to music, eat snacks, chat online, answer email, send SMS, etc. They need flexibility, variety, comfort and electric power. Traditional libraries not responding to users' needs are bound to draw close to extinction.

The uprising of Learning Commons at HKUST is a response to the three challenges.

Library space and physical visits

To create the 1,800 square meters floor space for a Learning Commons, stacks and shelves on one entire floor were moved away. Over 83,000 volumes of dated and low use materials were relocated to a temporary storage. By shifting the focus of library space from information storage to study space, the Learning Commons becomes a new and additional attraction for users. A solid indicator of increased physical visits is the exit gate count. The monthly gate count in April 2012 was 18% higher than that in April 2011, while the comparison for May 2012 and May 2011 was an increase of 15%.

Perception on libraries and librarians

The repurposing of library space from information storage to modern, attractive and friendly study space unquestionably renewed users' perception on the Library. At the same time, librarians demonstrated our potential and insight in learning support in a broader sense: in terms of study space design and management, facility support for learning activities, information literacy teaching, curricular and extracurricular support, and partnership building with other campus stakeholders.

New learning styles

As described in the previous section, the Learning Commons is designed specifically to support new learning styles and trends, with emphasis on big screens, technology-rich environment, and varieties of space for different learning modes, relaxation and socializing. Students can easily move from quiet study in the Open Study Area to taking a break in the Refreshment Zone; or start from talking with peers in the Refreshment Zone to forming an impromptu project discussion in a group study room. Wi-fi lets them stay connected, with printing and scanning facilities around the corner. The Learning Commons is geared towards fitting the learning styles and needs of this new generation in the modern learning landscape.

In short, the Learning Commons has helped transform library space into a stimulating, inspiring and collaborative place. However, we cannot leave it to our stakeholders to discover these exciting changes themselves. As some users such as administrators and researchers had seldom set foot in the Library for a long while, there was a need to invite them back in the new renovated space and explore what learning activities students can engage in and what collaborative undertaking academia and supporting units can partner with the Library.

User Engagement Process

In order to reach out to the different campus stakeholders about these new facilities, the Library initiates a user engagement process by launching a vigorous promotion plan. In communications literature, the popular 5W framework has these elements - *Who says What to Whom through Which channel with What effect*. Here is how we apply the framework in our promotion plan:

- The messengers (*Who*) were librarians, represented by the Associate University Librarian, the Learning Commons Manager, and other key contact persons for different groups.
- The messages (*What*) were to inform users about the new facilities of the Library Extension and the Learning Commons.
- The intended audience (to *Whom*) were campus stakeholders including senior administrators, teaching faculty and managers of academic and administrative units. Students and representatives of Student Union were invited too, although they were not the main targets in this particular exercise.
- The promotion (*Which channel*) included a 1.5 hour visit consisting of a tour of the Library Extension and the Learning Commons, a presentation, and a discussion session. Promotion was also channelled through traditional and social media, with the culmination at the official opening ceremony on March 26, 2012.
- The primary goals (*What effect*) are different for the two major audience groups: for teaching faculties and campus service providers, the main goal was to get them interested in the facilities, so that they would explore the potential of the Learning Commons in providing learning services; for university administrators, the visit aimed to demonstrate the Library's accountability and effort in developing learning support in terms of space and services.

In the winter break of January 2012, emails were sent out to different user groups inviting them for a visit. Responses were overwhelming. In January and February 2012, 32 tours were conducted to about 220 participants of different user groups, including the President and all vice presidents, deans, associate deans, department heads, directors, managers, faculty members, professional and support staff. All tours were conducted by the Learning Commons Manager and the Associate University Librarian. The University Librarian, some library department heads or subject librarians participated in some sessions relevant to their rank or lines of duties. As the Learning Commons is a collaborative project with the Publishing Technology Center, their Director and staff led the tour in the Creative Media Zone. To coordinate the promotion, a project webpage was developed in the Library intranet to document scheduling, tour guides and presenters. A pamphlet of floor plan with key information was printed; an artist illustration of the Creative Media Zone was prepared; and multiple versions of PowerPoint presentation was made to target different groups of stakeholders. Other internal management policies and procedures were developed, such as room booking policies, staffing plan, and opening hours.

The dynamics of engagement was strongest during the discussion sessions after the tours. When different stakeholders were induced to have an open exchange with librarians after seeing the physical facilities, a lot of ideas and possibilities were brought up.

Apart from arranging the physical visits, different media channels were also employed to increase the visibility. The Learning Commons was featured on the Library website, Library newsletter, Library Facebook page, blog, campus E-board, the university's newsletter, etc. An opening ceremony was planned and finally launched on March 26 when all equipment and facilities were set up. All senior administrators, deans, associate deans and directors were invited, along with library directors of other academic libraries in Hong Kong.

The outcome of this promotion plan were achieved with better than expected effects, as these publicity efforts successfully highlighted the Library's accomplishment after 2 years planning and renovation; made the new facilities highly visible, opened the door of communication with the entire campus, formed partnership on learning activities and programs, and collected users' feedback. In sum, our communication efforts achieved their intended outcomes, successfully engaging various stakeholders in the university.

This is also consistent with the current conceptualization in user (or customer) engagement process. The process is to get customer engaged, more than just mere involvement and participation (van Doorn et al. 2010). During the process, five sub processes were involved: learning, sharing, advocating, socialising and co-developing. Users *learnt* about the facilities and services. They *shared* on their own or students' needs and experiences. They *advocated* for some best practices and examples from other units or organization. *Socializing* occurred as two-way, informal, non-functional interactions between Library staff and users took place. *Co-developing* is a process where users contribute to organization by assisting in the development of new products or services (Brodie et al. 2011). In this case, users suggested many different learning activities and events the Library can provide.

Engagement Outcomes

Two significant outcomes emerged as a result of the user engagement process. First, a wide variety of learning activities and events has been initiated by different user groups in partnership with the Library after the visits. During the discussion sessions of the physical visits, users were asked how they would envision their units or students can make use of the space. Many creative ideas and practical suggestions were raised. A wide array of potential activities was put forward: seminars, workshops, training; presentation practices, student consultation, mock-up interviews, counseling and advising in Group Study Rooms; math/language/media literacy tutorial in the E-learning Classrooms; and social functions in the Refreshment Zone. Users also gave recommendations on how to further improve the facilities such as installing blinds in the transparent Multifunction Room, and providing video-conferencing equipment. They also queried if certain functions could be held in different venues, such as holding online tests in the E-learning Classrooms. As all users were engaged in the informal feedback sessions, they brought back ideas to their units.

At the same time, campus stakeholders were amazed by the effort and insight of librarians in study space design; and our ability in reaching out and promoting this new service facility. Their eyes were open to new roles that the Library and librarians can play in the new landscape of learning support.

The following is a detailed account of these two outcomes.

1. Enhancing Learning Activities and Events

The Learning Commons received requests from various teaching and service units to host activities of different nature beginning spring 2012. They can be grouped into three categories : curricular learning, skill development and research-related activities.

Curricular Learning:

Mathematics Support Center

The Mathematics Department at HKUST piloted a Mathematics Support Center at the Learning Commons. The Center offers drop-in tutoring services for students, who use the computers in the Classroom to access the online homework system. The pilot was a success. Attendance at the Center had generally been higher than attendance to traditional tutorial sessions. Students found the service helpful and would like the Center to continue with expanded hours of operation. The Center continued to operate in the subsequent Fall semester.

Information Literacy for Language Courses

Librarians conducted a series of information literacy sessions that are incorporated into language courses. At the same time, a few individual language classes were also conducted in the E-learning Classrooms to experience the new learning environment.

Skills Development:

Career Development

The Career Center organizes a variety of services for students using the Group Study Rooms. These ranged from CV workshops, interview skills, career counseling, as well as job interviews. The School of Business also made use of the Group Study Rooms to organize CV writing training for students. The Refreshment Zone provided an informal space for the groups to mingle with the instructors after the training.

Media Literacy

Publishing Technology Center organized training sessions on video making. Some sessions were conducted at the Creative Media Zone, others were held at the E-Learning Classrooms. A general education course on animation making also made use of the graphics software at the E-Learning Classrooms for classes.

Information Literacy

Different library workshops were conducted in the Learning Commons in spring 2012. For instance, *Introduction to Special Collections*, *Using RefWorks*, *Company Information*, *Legal Information* and talks on copyrights.

Informal learning

The President of HKUST, Prof. Tony Chan, held one tea gathering with about 20 students in the Refreshment Zone. It was a casual event with students freely exchanging

views with university administrators. Feedbacks from the organizing unit about the venue were very positive. This tea gathering eventually becomes a regular event in the Refreshment Zone.

Publishing Technology Center organized a series of photography talks held in the Creative Media Zone. Seasoned photographers were invited to share their passion and expertise. All the talks were fully registered and well-received.

Research-related:

One professor in marketing used an E-Learning Classroom to conduct behavioral research. Another professor from the Department of Economics employed the computers in an E-Learning Classroom to run decision-making experiment.

2. Improving Image and Identity

The second significant outcome of the user-engaged Learning Commons is that the Library has further lifted its image and identity among all user groups. Since the opening of the Library twenty years ago, it has been treasured by all users because of its quality collection, user-oriented services, advanced technology, capable staff, well-managed space, and a fantastic view. This enhanced image is especially salient because of the growing financial pressure most libraries face.

Indeed after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1998, all academic libraries in Hong Kong have experienced a long period of stagnant budgets. HKUST is not exempted. Collection growth has been reduced, applications in new technology have slowed down, some non essential services have been cut, and departed staff members have not been replaced. The budget tightening is further reinforced by the pending digitization challenges in libraries (declining print materials, increasing availability of multi-media on-line and growing mobile technology). As the “Google effect” penetrates into every household, millennial users are savvy in social-media tools; the traditional missions of a library (space, collection and information service) are consistently being challenged.

The Learning Commons has become a new service platform for librarians. Through the user engagement process, campus stakeholders were first amazed by the physical facilities, and then impressed when librarians did not only create and manage the new study space, but also invited them to be involved in exploring new possibilities for students learning. The engagement process led to a sense of belongings with the Library, and a good foundation for partnership with librarians. To senior administrators, the process successfully demonstrated the value and distinctiveness of the Learning Commons. Soon after the round of physical visits in January and February of 2012, the university President, Provost and Vice Presidents started to make the Library and the Learning Commons a showcase for university visitors. In the eight months from February to September 2012, the Library received 114 groups of visitors, which was almost double of the whole year figure in 2011. The image that the Learning Commons is a hub for students is so vivid that the University President chose that as the place to visit when he wanted to greet students in the first school day in the Fall semester 2012.

The Learning Commons has provided an opportunity for the Library to engage different user groups in the university. This favorable image it has portrayed paves the

way for different collaborative initiatives with various units. It has also influenced budget decision makers in support of resources to the Library. A few months since its opening, the University has also successfully raised funds and named the Learning Commons after the donor.

Addressing the Three Challenges

The Learning Commons at HKUST has opened an opportunity for the Library to define its future role in our increasingly challenged environment. In particular, the commons model is a powerful response to the three challenges described previously, namely, *decline in physical visits, low perception of libraries and librarians, and change in learning styles*. However, without engaging our stakeholders, a commons cannot function to its full potential. The user engagement process described in this case study effectively gave the HKUST Learning Commons a jump start. The two engagement outcomes directly support this claim.

The multitude of learning activities in Spring 2012 did not only revert the decline in physical visits, it also indicates that the new space and facilities do support the teaching and learning needs of the university community. Collaboration and partnership with different units enables the Library to work harmoniously with different user groups, support their teaching and learning functions, and contribute to students' academic and social lives.

The elevated image and identity brought about by the engagement process speaks to the perception issue. Stakeholders now see the Library as a modern study space, a proactive service unit; and librarians as visionary service providers and partners.

According to van Doorn (2011), customer engagement has consequences for different stakeholders. For customers, successful engagement process will bring cognitive, attitudinal, emotional consequences. For the firm, successful engagement process will bring financial consequences such as referral and word-of-mouth behavior. The reputation of the firm will be improved. Highly engaged customers can be an important source of knowledge, generating ideas of new products, contributing suggestions for modifying existing brands, and offering constructive suggestions for frontline staff. In this case study, different users made referrals, spread word-of-mouth, proposed ideas, and submitted requests. In the organizational level, successful engagement did result in financial gains for the Library as well as the University in a fund-raising project.

The promotion experience described here demonstrated that the concept of user engagement can also be useful in library service promotion, especially for new service like the Learning Commons. The two salient outcomes identified are highly eminent in helping the Library within the financial stringency across campus. They may also open up transformative change for the Library in the future.

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