How librarians (and others!) love silos:
Three stories from the field

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Introduction

For the last decade, I have been a library space planning consultant, working on over fifty projects. The following stories draw from that experience.

Libraries are unlike most other campus building in that almost everyone—students, faculty and staff from all disciplines, and often the public—register ownership claims on them. Students consistently give libraries the highest ranking among campus spaces that support learning behaviors important to them.[1] Libraries occupy central and highly prized campus space. These and other factors—such as late operating hours and certain social conventions about library use--create unmatched opportunities for impact on learning. These factors also challenge planners to achieve levels of collaboration—among, classroom faculty, students, librarians, information technologists, and student services staff—unmatched elsewhere.

In my experience, there are two principal, interrelated obstacles in library projects to achieving high impact on learning. The first is that while we always intend to plan for learning, we usually plan primarily for service delivery. Our self-identification as service providers— matched by strong expectations for service by students and faculty—drives this outcome. In this environment, whatever we may say about learning (which typically goes undefined in our planning documents), our actual planning priorities relate to the good delivery of library

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[1] See the author's "Learning Behaviors and Learning Spaces," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 11, no. 3 (2011): 765–789; also available under the Experience/Publications tab of the author's Web site, www.libraryspaceplanning.com (accessed 1 October 2014).

services.[2] In thus setting our priorities, we act on the unexamined assumption that excellent service produces good learning, just as we once assumed that excellent lectures produced good learning.[3]

The second obstacle is that while most members of the academic community acknowledge that high impact on learning requires collaboration among several professional groups, they all too often act chiefly within professional silos.[4] These silos represent powerful communities of practice—especially among classroom faculty librarians, information technologists, and student services staff—that all too rarely become communities of interest.[5]

<u>Three stories from the field</u>

The following stories illustrate the obstacles just described and their baleful impact on learning.

- *Favoring service*. A couple of years ago, I visited a university library where much of the entry floor is devoted to a learning commons, which had opened fewer than ten years ago. The concept paper guiding development of this learning commons called for a "collaborative environment" that brings together information skills and services "in support of user needs" and committed to the development of information literacy skills. Tellingly, the word learning has virtually no substantive presence in this two page concept paper, which is much more concerned with ideas of a "new service model" and with listing various "service providers" that might populate the learning commons.

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[2] I first documented this disparity between profession and action in *Libraries Designed for Learning*, Perspectives on the Evolving Library (Washington, D.C: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2003): 20-22; also available at http://www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub122abst.html (accessed 1 October 2014).

[3] The now classic statement on this matter is Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, "From Teaching to Learning—a New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," Change 27, no. 6 (November 1995): 12–26.

[4] The power of professional silos was evident in survey responses of library directors participating in workshops on information literacy sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges. Some 93% of these librarians affirmed that "my campus encourages a climate of collaboration," whereas a much lower 59% affirmed that "collaboration exists among curricula designers, faculty, librarians, academic advisors, and computing staff."   See the author's "Campus Cultures Fostering Information Literacy," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 7, no. 2 (April 2007): 147–67.

[5] For definitions and a discussion of these two communities, see Gerhard Fischer, "Social Creativity: Making All Voices Heard," a document posted on the Learning Spaces Collaboratory Website at http://www.pkallsc.org/Resources/The-Planning-Process (accessed 1 October 2014).

I visited when there were very few people in the library, making it impossible to say what the learning experience in this space might actually be. But the absence of people made the design principles especially obvious. A very large rectangular central space with reader and computing stations and a service desk was flanked on each side by office and other spaces occupied by professional staff. Library offices were ranged down one side, while offices and service spaces for tutoring and technology staff were ranged in separate spaces down the other side. This arrangement strongly reinforced professional silos and did little to foster the "collaborative environment" called for in the concept paper.

I left the building feeling that no robust understanding of learning or learning environments informed the design of this so-called learning commons, which was in fact designed to deliver "on-stop shopping" for information, technology, and tutoring services. Professional silos had indeed been moved closer together, but the would-be learner still encountered co-location rather than collaboration among service providers.

- *Protecting professional turf.* I have twice visited another university library that had been a pioneer in creating a learning commons, bringing together librarians, information technologists, and tutoring staff. I was told when I first visited that librarians had been highly critical of creating the learning commons in a large space just behind the library entrance. They saw that prime space as belonging to reference librarians, needed for the good delivery of reference services. In championing the learning commons, the library director had "sold out" his library colleagues. I returned a few years later for a public program where information technologists, tutoring staff, and reference librarians spoke about this learning commons. The first two groups gave a compelling account of their innovative work together that prompted close attention in their auditors and a desire to emulate their successes. The librarians' account was by comparison (and for this librarian!) embarrassingly routine and uninspiring.

  In this case, allegiance among librarians to their own professional silo largely precluded the possibility of the meaningful collaboration on which the full success of the learning commons depended. In effect, librarians made it impossible fully to consider the ways different communities of practice deal with issues of service and learning or to build a new community of interest to foster student success.

- *Protecting bureaucratic turf*. Directors of facilities are responsible for managing the costs of capital projects. They make friends when they can say yes and antagonize colleagues when they say no. This is an unenviable position, and the facilities director at a liberal arts college not unreasonably felt it easier to set preemptive limits on the planning process at the outset

so as to avoid having to say no later.   The project offered striking opportunities to redesign space to foster much closer contact and collaboration between library staff and classroom faculty. We were told not to explore those design opportunities or to estimate the cost of various ways to act on them.

These are all stories about practitioners narrowly controlling their work environment; they are stories about favoring such control over the exploration of opportunities for collaboration and enhanced impact on student learning. There is nothing unusual about these stories; I have encountered similar situations at far too many other institutions.

<u>Changing the story</u>

It does not have to be this way. It has been my great privilege to work with a number—regrettably a smaller number—of librarians, information technologists, tutoring staff, facilities directors, chief academic officers, vice presidents for financial affairs, and college presidents who have been notably energetic about and successful in freeing library planning from siloed thinking. In different ways, in different degrees, and over different lengths of time, these leaders were able to move communities of practice to become communities of interest. They changed the stories for their institutions.

How can this be done? Readers of this paper will already know the invaluable assistance available from the Learning Spaces Collaboratory (http://www.pkallsc.org; accessed 1 October 2014). Happily, many additional excellent guides both to the planning process and to the substantive issues of planning are available. These include:

- EDUCAUSE's pioneering publication, *Learning Spaces*, edited by Dianna G. Oblinger (Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE, 2006), available at http://www.educause.edu/research-and-publications/books/learning-spaces (accessed 1 October 2014). This wonderful book includes many essays on general principles and practices in designing for learning as well as a score of case studies.
- the Learning Space Tool Kit, A Resource for Designing and Sustaining Technology-Rich Informal Learning Space, sponsored by North Carolina State University, the consulting firm brightspot, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and AECON Design + Planning; available at http://learningspacetoolkit.org/ (accessed 1 October 2014). This site offers a rich variety of planning tools for every phase and every aspect of learning space planning.
- Learning Spaces Performance Rating System, Version 1, September 2014, sponsored by EDUCAUSE, available at http://www.educause.edu/eli/initiatives/learning-space-rating-

[system](accessed 1 October 2014). The intention is to provide a set of measurable criteria to assess how well the design of classrooms supports and enables active learning. These criteria form the basis for a rating system that will allow institutions to benchmark their projects against best practices within higher education. The current version of the LSRS deals with formal learning spaces, but future versions will include informal spaces and more specialized spaces.

- a design and planning blog by Elliot Felix, founder of brightspot, available at http://brightspotstrategy.com/blog/ (accessed 1 October 2014). Felix comments on a wide variety of learning space topics, including academic libraries. Entering the word "library" in the site's search box produces scores of results.

The incentives for planning and the questions that planning is meant to answer are particularly important in changing the story and outcomes for learning. The first of these involves process, while the second concerns planning substance.

Too frequently, the dominant incentives in library planning are the need to provide more study space, to repair building infrastructure (especially HVAC systems and electrical supply), to meet code requirements, and to remedy operational problems arising from previous interventions that have not worn well over time. These are powerful incentives, and there is no wishing them away. It is, however, possible to assert that issues of learning must get at least equal attention and have comparable claims on institutional resources. No college or university exists to provide study space; every college and university exists to foster student success in learning. To set and then insist on learning incentives is to align library planning in a deeply meaningful way with institutional mission.

The operational problems of a building are impossible to ignore; opportunities for greater success in learning are all too easy to slight, given our allegiance to professional silos and the unquestioned need to manage costs. To change planning incentives to include learning as a meaningful and dominant factor requires strong leadership. This is the obvious responsibility of chief academic officers and other senior institutional leaders. It is also the responsibility of the project's shepherd. Perhaps less obviously, it is also the responsibility of every participant in and every beneficiary of the planning process. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, so it takes a true community of interest—where people with different professional perspectives and languages can forge common ground—to ensure that library projects actually enact institutional goals.

No design process, however excellent, can produce results better than the substantive questions it addresses. These questions function as a first iteration of the common ground that

must be created. They are questions too rarely asked or pursued with any rigor in library space planning.   They are what Jeanne Narum calls "first questions"—questions about "the nature of the educational experience [that is desired for a given space. These are] . . . questions that must be asked first and asked persistently throughout the [planning] process."[6] They include:

Questions about educational experience and institutional mission
- In the endeavor to design libraries for learning, what does the word learning mean? What specific learning behaviors do we want library space to foster?
- How much time do students now spend studying? How much time should they spend studying? How can space design help effect changes in students' level of effort or other study behaviors that may be needed?
- For what reasons and how frequently do we want students to be in the library building? How do our aspirations for student use compare to their actual use of the library building?
- What impact(s) does the library wish to have on student learning? What impact(s) does it now have?
- To what percentage of the study body do our aspirations for educational impact pertain? With what percentage of the student body do we now realize our aspirations?
- What relationship(s) between readers and librarians do we seek? Do the reference desk, other service points (including those in virtual space), instructional spaces, and librarian offices effectively help to create this relationship?

Questions about virtual and physical learning spaces
- What is it about the learning that will happen in library space that compels a decision to build bricks-and-mortar learning space, rather than rely on virtual space?
- What part of our desired impact on student learning is best realized in virtual space? What part can be realized only in physical space? What part of the latter has to be accomplished in the library building itself, and what part in other campus learning spaces?
- In what places do reference and instruction librarians work? For what percentage of a typical semester do they work there? Where should librarians work, and for what percentage of a typical semester should they work there?

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[6] "Building Communities: Asking the Right Questions," Project Kaleidoscope (N.D.); at http://www.pkal.org/documents/Building%20Communities%20-%20Asking%20the%20Right%20Questions.pdf (accessed 1 October 2014). See also Scott Bennett, "First Questions for Designing Higher Education Learning Spaces," *Journal of Academic Librarianship,* 33, no.1 (2007): 14-26, also available under the Experience/Publications tab of the author's Web site, www.libraryspaceplanning.com   (accessed 1 October 2014).

- Beyond the classroom and the library, where are the most successful campus learning spaces? What makes them successful?
- What message, beyond that of welcome, should the library entrance declare? How might that declaration be made?[7]

This paper invites readers to imagine the difference that asking questions about learning will make, instead of asking how many study spaces or computers are needed in a project. Asking first about learning, rather than about the things of learning, will lead planners in new directions. This paper also invites readers to imagine the difference that will result if they insist their questions be answered not just by librarians but by classroom faculty, students, information technologists, and student services staff as well, all working collaboratively—and answered in ways that are compelling to chief academic officers and other institutional leaders. Readers are asked to imagine what can happen if they shape library planning around institutional mission, around a strong declaration about the learning they wish to foster, and around how members of the learning community may be brought together in thoughtfully designed space to learn.

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[7] These questions are drawn from the author's "Learning Behaviors and Learning Spaces," cited above.