Proceedings of the 15th Annual Conference
4-11 October 2013, Cape Town International Conference Centre, Cape Town

Libraries in Dialogue for Transformation and Innovation

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Library and innovation in the ever changing face of user needs: an academic library

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ABSTRACT:

We are currently living in a world where “up to date” or “most current” is always a better option to many other things. Each person and entity out there should be able to adapt to changes of the world and people. If there was no change there would have been no innovation, no technology and no knowledge to go around for improvement of our livelihood. Both aspects of Change and Innovation share a close relationship. Change is always such a daunting and scary move for any person or entity but to see innovation take place, there needs to be the desire to change the current form of things to what would be suitable and in par with future goals.

Libraries have evolved over time and many have accepted changes that have come with time even though so many of the aspects such as the physical space, clientele, information resources, technological facilities and staff members have been challenging. Change is an inevitable fact, which comes bearing fruits all the time.

Such changes within the library environment include offering real time remote library services; a well-rounded online experience that could be mistaken for an actual physical library visit; online chat service; online and video tutorials; virtual tours; a larger variety of e-book offerings and having librarians that are skilled to carry out these services. The results of these changes challenge the library to think out of the box and invest in technological developments that would allow these changes to take place.

A great example of an institution embracing changes is The University of Pretoria Library Services (UPLS). It has made strides in which improvements in their services have been made. The UPLS has integrated web 2.0 tools to be able to advance its services it provides to all its clients. These tools include Facebook, Twitter, Blogs and Wikis, where some of the new books can be advertised, the latest developments in the library be publicised and hear what the community as a whole has to say. An additional service that has improved service is the “Chat to a Librarian”, real time chat service that users have come to appreciate as it offers assistance that is immediately needed. These tools have helped highlight some of the needs of the library users.

Innovation is brought forward by understanding and knowing how relevant the library wants to be in comparison to all the changes that take place constantly and its future.
The real change and innovation lies with the librarians, they are the heart of libraries and can drive real change and innovation within libraries. Training, power, trust and encouragement should be given to them as they would know the library and clientele much better than anyone else would.

INTRODUCTION

Can you just imagine what or how the library looked a decade ago, 10-15 years back? Public, Private and Academic Libraries were nothing like we are witnessing currently. All the technological advancements that have taken place in the world have had a ripple effect on the libraries, who would have thought that today we would be enjoying such developments and asking for more? I certainly could not have seen how great our enthusiasm on this would have been. Change has certainly come into our libraries, our homes as some may call it due to embracing this thing called change. Change is one thing that is constant and it is impossible to go against change, otherwise you risk being left behind in the “old ages”.

We have seen the introduction and implementation of things like wi-fi, live chats, remote access to the library and its resources, virtual tours and online tutorials. These were not so prevalent or well known in the libraries a few years back. It is a little difficult to imagine what the next decade will bring, but what we do know is that what we see in libraries today will be very different to what we will be exposed to in 10-15 years time. We can only imagine and try to anticipate what the library can do to keep up with all these changes, developments and the kind of users that visit the library because they are technologically savvy.

What has taken place is what we can call progress and innovation at its best. All the entities involved in the libraries have gone through some kind of progression into the next stage, may it be the library itself, the library staff or the library users, change has certainly taken place. We can say that we are also reaping some of the fruits of this development.

TYPES OF USERS

This change that has taken place has seen not only libraries evolve over time but so has the users of these libraries. Library users have become a challenging but amazing mix of senior citizens, middle aged, young adults and the younger generation or the youth. And this mix goes beyond the physical description of users and goes into things like their lifestyles.

The old fashioned- who still want to visit the physical library, take out a book, page through and smell the pages and who still treasure the human interaction they get with the librarians;

The technologically savvy- these are the users who are up to date with the latest electronic devices, they know all the operating systems, they know all the applications by name, they
want to know where the wi-fi hot spots are, they are not shy to let you know that the library needs to improve its technology and they prefer to do their activities online; and will visit the library once in a blue moon.

New and curious users- these are the people that have never been exposed to the library environment, have never been inside one, just starting out in school or university and want to get their hand on anything that will help them get through their study years.

Each one of these users has some level of expectation when they receive the green light to be able to use the library. They will expect a journey full of promise and easy sailing, that will lead them to a world of resources without much hurdles. And then at the end it becomes more of a question of whether the libraries are ready for such expectations and whether they can meet all of those expectations.

Users’ needs change most of the time, those change are influenced by what is happening around them, in their homes, lives, workplace and the environment. It may sound like a stretch when saying that some needs are influenced by external factors but there is truth in that. If a user believes in a more greener environment, they may communicate or campaign that a library look more into getting e-books, e-resources and spend less and less on printed resources; or you could find a user that would insist the library do away with some computers or book shelves to create more study space as some may struggle to study at home or have no other alternatives. Everyone is influenced by something they are experiencing in their own environments. One thing that we know for sure is that most of the needs of the users are similar, you just have a few exceptions.

The biggest challenge would then fall onto the libraries to make sure they meet these users needs, be able to understand, empathise, support and provide satisfactory and excellent service to them by being very creative and innovative.

11 YEARS AGO, FROM WHAT I REMEMBER

11 years ago sounds like a very long time ago, which in all honesty is a very long time. To be precise, it is a decade ago and a decade ago the library I was firstly exposed to was what I call today, a humble room of knowledge. A facility that was the size of a master bedroom with a few shelves that contained books that covered subjects offered in a school and two computers with a study table manned by an English teacher and a library monitor/assistant. That first library was the library I had been introduced to when I was in primary level and moved to high school with that very same library. At that time I didn’t know any better than what I knew as a sufficient library. My mind was confined to what I knew and dreaming big had not become part of my vocabulary. So I had no point of reference on how that library could meet my unknown needs. All I knew was that I wanted to read books and I wanted to constantly look at Atlas’s as Geography was my favourite subject. What we received was sufficient to us as learners as it helped with things like homework. And again, I never would have thought
any library would evolve beyond having two computers and a bedroom size library. Fast track to my years at university and what do I find, an institution with not only one computer but several computers and a building dedicated to the library to support their many students.

**WHAT I HAVE COME TO KNOW AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA LIBRARY**

The University of Pretoria Library has an impressive and all rounded service that it provides to its thousands of users. The users come from all corners of the world to use the library and its offerings. These users are undergraduate, honours, masters and PhD levels, institutional staff, external users and each from a different background to the other. As mentioned, these users and students come with certain expectations of how their needs can be met. The library has embraced information technology and took advantage of what it had to offer in terms of developing its services and facilities. I order to be able to develop these services and facilities, we had to know what the users really want and need from us. To know what they need we have had to be open minded and communication as to be able to hear their experience as users.

*What the users needed/ need are*

- **Study facilities**- Students need areas to study and work on their assignments and projects, as well as group study facilities.
- **More computers**- Not everyone can afford to get laptops, notebooks or other devices so it translates into needing more computers to cater to those without.
- **Multiple Copies of one book**- The number of students has increased over the years and that tends to put strain on the books we have, requests are always there for multiple copies to be bought especially for the prescribed books.
- **Access to resources**- Students need to be able to access the available resources without too much hassle whether they are on campus or not.
- **Up to date resources**- Resources need to be up to date, relevant and current to what the students may need. No one wants to use old resources only.
- **E-resources**- Some students cannot physically be in the library, alternative measures need to be taken so that they are catered for by providing additional resources in electronic format.
- **Wi-Fi**- Even though there are still students who need the library computers, there also those that have their own devices which they can bring into the library to use and for them to have full benefits is to have access to the library wi-fi in order to access the library’s website and catalogue.
- **User friendly catalogue and ease of search**- Students need to be able to navigate the catalogue to be able to find what they are looking for; it needs to be clear and easily accessible for them to be able to do it on their own.
- **Research Support** - The institution has a huge intake of post graduate students who need support from the library. They need information of training sessions, workshops, meeting other scholars and networking.

- **Library Support** - Students need assistance when seeking their way through the library and its services, and that assistance would come from the library staff itself.

**The developments that came into place to meet these needs**

The UP library realised that information technology will provide faster access to the library resources and make it easier to navigate through it all. What the library did was:

To invest in modern facilities by renovating the library to have more study rooms that catered to both individuals and groups who needed to use them, and uses a system of booking so as to maintain control of the places and give all students a chance to use these spaces. The Research Commons was also built specifically for the masters and PhD students, to study and do their group work and projects.

Getting more computers is determined many times by the library’s physical space, if there is then more can be purchased. What the library did was to divide the computers in the library according to usage of a specific activity. Some of them had been allocated to be used only for searching the catalogue, typing or editing of documents; another batch was allocated to be used by paying users where you can do anything you want, it is governed by the time you wish to stay on; and the rest are allocated to students so that they get on the system and do their own things using their own megabytes given to them by the institution. But the downside to this last batch is that students are stuck in queues for long periods before getting a chance to sit on a pc. This system has helped in directing those that just want to search the catalogue and leave to know where to go.

- Multiple copies of publications has always been a cry from students and the information specialists together with the departments they cater to can communicate the possibilities of buying more copies obviously depending on the demand of that material.

- Access to resources is an imperative part of the library’s service. Remote access has been made available to most the resources the library offers as long as the students are able to authenticate themselves. This means that their access to a world of knowledge is only a username and password away when they are both on and off campus. If they do not have access to some resources, the alternative is communicating your query to the library, inter-library loans or an information specialist.

- The resources are kept up to date as much as possible and this is a result of wanting to stay abreast and relevant to the community at large, and to continuously provide support the users of the library.

- With the world changing so much and technology making it possible for people to be able to run their lives just by logging into a computer or laptop in the comfort of their own homes.
Students as well have taken advantage of this as the library offers a wide range of e-books, online journals, databases and links to some important websites that can be accessed from home or the workplace and can be downloaded or printed out. There has been an integration of social media tools into the curriculum and the library environment. Things like Facebook, Twitter, You-Tube, blogs and wikis have become part of the library’s drive in advertising the library and its new developments. Online tutorials have also become part of the library’s path to learning. These tutorials are of training on certain databases and installations of software’s. They assist the users immediately if they cannot come into the library for a one on one training session. More of these ideas will be implemented as the library progresses where more help will be a click away. More and more people are moving towards an e- environment and the library is moving along with them.

The Wi-Fi was introduced into the library and it has been welcomed with open arms as it has proven to be an important tool and reducing the queues for computers and gives the students the chance to work at their own pace and to bring their own different devices and get on the Wi-Fi.

The library catalogue has had to go through changes over the years as systems and users were continuously changing. The current interface makes it easier to navigate the catalogue and users are able to find what they are looking for. Search boxes are clearly set out as well as the support links are easily identifiable the moment you arrive on the homepage. The library is always looking for new ways to improve its look and feel so as to accommodate the different users they receive.

Research Support is part and parcel of what the university as a whole wants to offer to its students and in turn, the library has advocated for that support by having the Research commons in the library working together with The Graduate Research Hub to offer post graduate students things like forums, workshops, training sessions to help students on their study paths. The library invests a lot in research materials that are current for the students.

The library support that is offered comes in the form of telephonic sessions with the libraries enquiry desk where they can assist you with general enquiries; then there is a “chat to a librarian” service that gives real time services by chatting to the librarian online that can assist you. If the online chat in not live, they users have an opportunity to leave their questions that would be answered at the earliest convenience. The more specific the queries or questions are, then the information specialist would take over. In essence, the users will always have a point where they can receive support from the library.

UP Library services has stepped up over the years in learning about their own services and their own users. They have put in measures that see that students are catered for in terms of support and library resources and facilities. They can only build on these developments and changes accordingly and try to anticipate what the users would need in future.

CONCLUSION
The academic library can go under so much pressure in meeting the needs of the students that are forever changing. Technology had made its mark by influencing change onto everything and everyone. One would be tempted to believe that the academic library would never change or develop itself to be a powerful and relevant tool as we see the years progressing and the technologies continuously pouring in. Imagine how the next 15-20 years will impact on the libraries. Not only is the curriculum morphing bit by bit but the students seem to be more bolder in what they need to see and experience in the library. For this to take full effect then the librarians will have to be on board as well. Staff member need to also embrace that change, that innovation to be able to meet and understand what the users needs. That is very much possible, a collective effort is what will see the library manage the needs of users and give an all rounded service to the whole community.

REFERENCES:

