New Look at an Old Space: Participatory Design Research at a Liberal Arts College Library

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Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College

Anticipating major physical renovations, Bryn Mawr College Information Services staff members analyzed students’ use of space in Canaday Library, the college’s main humanities and social sciences library, in 2012. Our biennial customer service survey data has shown that our patrons want to have input into library decisions that affect them (MISO 2010, 2012, 2014; Figure 1). When seeking community feedback to inform a proposed redesign of the first floor of Canaday Library, we looked at related case studies (Foster & Gibbons, 2005; Foster, Hartel, Lundh, & Sonnenwald, 2012) and attended participatory design workshops sponsored by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). Following Foster & Gibbons (2007), we conducted a study of our space’s primary users—students—to let their voices and perspectives not only inform, but drive the design.

Importance to students: “Your input into library decisions that affect you”

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
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Mixed Methodology & Participatory Design

Space Usage Observations

We gathered quantitative data on how Canaday Library was being used during the study period (six weeks in Spring 2012) through regular observations. Staff members counted the number of people on each floor several times a day, for a total of 28 observation sessions. We counted how many patrons were using different portions of the library, and how they were using them. We also noted patterns of computer usage and engagement in group work.

Student Design Workshops

We asked 12 students to spend 30 minutes illustrating their ideas for Canaday’s first floor. Staff members did not help or observe the students during this time. The students then described their drawings to a staff member, who asked clarifying questions. The videoed conversation was later coded and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Student Photos Interviews

Seven students were given a list of 10 – 20 places or things to photograph in order to illustrate their typical work habits. Then, they were asked to arrange the photos in a small digital presentation. In interviews, students spent 30 minutes with a project staff member describing each picture they had taken.

Public Brainstorming Board

We mounted a public comment board in order to gather spontaneous comments from Canaday Library patrons. The board was situated in a high traffic area near the entrance and service desks in Canaday (Figure 2d). Over the study period, we collected 380 comment cards, with approximately 60 unique comments. The comment cards were then transcribed and coded for qualitative analysis.

Importance of Library Space

In our biennial customer service survey, Bryn Mawr students consistently rank “library as space” variables as “Important” or “Very Important,” while their satisfaction levels range from “Somewhat Satisfied” to “Satisfied” (MISO 2010, 2012, 2014; Figure 7). The results of this current study may be able to help us bridge this satisfaction gap in several areas:

- **Atmospheric:** Students want to work in a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing library. They used words like: “warm,” “welcoming,” “cozy,” “relaxing,” “restoring,” and “modern” to describe their ideal space.
- **Functional Space:** Students asked for both more quiet spaces and more talking spaces, and for better separation between functional spaces.
- **Technology:** Participants noted the importance of the public printers and computers on Canaday’s first floor, which constitute Bryn Mawr’s main campus computer lab (Figure 2c). Students also requested more power outlets and big work tables to plug in and spread out with their devices.

Rhy’s Carpenter Library

Many students mentioned Carpenter, our library for Art, Archaeology and Classical Studies, as an example of a library space in which they enjoy working. Completed in 1997, Carpenter has a modern feel with stone and glass architecture, earth-tone colors and a lot of natural light. It also has multiple types of quiet spaces and a variety of functional spaces, including exhibits and an art integrated into the rest of the library.

Power of Participatory Design & a Mixed Methodology

Most of the findings of this study do not come as a surprise to those of us who work at Canaday Library. However, we were intrigued by the remarkable consistency of the most common concerns, whether they were expressed via floor design drawings, photo diaries, brainstorming board comments, or, passively, via our space usage observations. Seeing similar results from multiple data collection methods has enabled us to use this data with confidence to inform capsul improvements to Canaday Library.

Selected References


