The Academic Library as Place: An Ethnographic Study on Information Learning Spaces for Student Collaboration

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Abstract

In Fall 2016, the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto launched its newly renovated Inforum Library. While the redesigned learning space facilitates key collaborative activity (i.e. group assignments), little assessment has been conducted to evaluate the 'library as place' and how students actually utilize the space for such a purpose (Ferria et al., 2017). By observing the Inforum library and coordinating interviews, this paper examines how graduate students use the new group study hubs to work collaboratively. Through a spatial lens, the behaviors and needs of users will be both unveiled and examined. In addition, this study can guide future design of collaborative spaces and assessment efforts in the library.

Keywords: Library as place; academic libraries; graduate students; library ethnography; library space; group work, collaboration

Introduction - The Inforum Library

In universities, the academic library is considered an information-education space (Ferria et al., 2017). The rise of information commons, or learning commons, is evidenced by the shift from collections management to the 'library as place' (Ferria et al., 2017). This was driven by new and evolving ways of thinking about physical spaces (Ferria et al., 2017). At the same time, libraries have long supported learning and collaboration – a place where students can express different points of view (Andrews et al., 2016). As the need for library spaces grows, study-areas tend to be the second-most utilized space (Fox & Doshi, 2013; Diller, 2015). With great determination to maintain relevance, libraries
allocate and reallocate space to emphasize the pedagogical shift toward learning-based interactions. As a result, spaces are redesigned to encourage group work, conversation, moving about, and re-adjustable furniture. This, therefore, creates physical and virtual platforms for knowledge creation (Jackson & Shenton, 2010).

At the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto, graduate students are frequently assigned group projects as part of their course work. In response to a shift in spatial trends, the Inforum Library unveiled its newly renovated library space in 2016. To maximize the functionality of the library, the Inforum was furnished with seven study-hubs to facilitate group work for up to five people. In literature which examines student usage of library spaces, students seem to enjoy welcoming and shared-learning community spaces (Turner, Welch, & Reynolds, 2013; Andrews, Wright, & Raskin, 2016; Ferria et al., 2017). This then allows students to connect informally (Ferria et al., 2017).

Arguably, the academic library can become the third place on campus for its ample study spaces, ambience, technology, services, and overall setting (Oldenburg, 1991). The community’s ‘third place’ provides diversity of human contact, where people come together to connect and build a shared community outside the home (first place) or the workplace (second place) (Oldenburg, 1991). The library can enrich campus life, create a sense of belongingness, and support the institutional mission of lifelong-learning.

This paper applies ethnographic research methods to examine and understand the specific group-space needs of the library’s student community, out of which the design was based. In the process, it also assesses the impact of the study-hubs on facilitating student communal or collaborative group work.

**Methods**

In an effort to explore the theme of student collaboration, seven study-hubs of the Inforum Library (Claude Bissell Building, University of Toronto) will serve as the field site. These green futuristic-looking hubs are created with custom-built polygonal shapes to fit the north-east facing windows of the building, as part of the Robarts complex (Figure 1). The intention of these hubs is to provide interactive group or collaborative spaces for students outside of the classroom. Thus, for the purpose of this research, the study hubs will serve as the primary field site in which observations of student activity (and engagement) work will take place.

The paper will focus on how students perceive the space and, consequently, how it is used. Photographs and spatial movement diagrams will identify key features of the hub. In addition, select students have agreed to participate in the study. They will be observed in the space, as well as invited to a semi-structured interview. The set sample includes three first-year Master of Information (MI) students, who are enrolled in at least one summer course. In other words, it is important to note that the small study sample may pose certain limitations to the study.

Due to the timing of the field research, it is also important to acknowledge that the study takes place during the Summer 2017 semester. As a result, there are significantly fewer courses offered,
either the afternoon and/or evening. This suggests that there are fewer full-time and part-time students enrolled in a summer course. Moreover, the condensed summer courses may affect the type of group work assigned and time commitment of students who are also working (i.e. part-time job, practicum, and any other professional work).

**Collaborative Spaces**

With regards to collaboration, MI students are encouraged to work with their student colleagues to better prepare them for the workplace: sociality and cooperativity are necessary skills for success. Opportunities for communication and interaction allow future graduates to form congeal network communities and learn to work as a team. As a result, many spaces in the Inforum are designed with this in mind. As a “temple of scholarship”, the library as place assumes an sanctified role, reflected both in its architecture and atmosphere (Ferria et al., 2017). The academic library holds a unique position on campus. It symbolically and physically represents the academic heart of an institution by supporting the academic community in new and evolving ways, especially in thinking about its physical spaces (Ferria et al., 2017). The library has many distinct functions which reflect both its unique legacy/traditions and evolving information technologies.

*Figure 1: Newly renovated study-hubs in the Inforum*
Group Collaboration

The frequency and type of group work at the Faculty of Information depend on course thematics and instructor preferences. This ultimately determines how students use the group study-hubs for collaboration. When students were asked to reflect on their past group assignments, it became clear that there were various opportunities for group work and team-based activities. Students noted:

“For a couple of classes, I had arts-based or creative, and project-based group assignments. This included creating a podcast and an arts deliverable. Other group projects I had were more academic in nature, like group papers and presentations” (Student 1).

“The only reason I planned to use the study hubs to do group work is when the group meeting rooms were unavailable, or it was a quick meeting” (Student 2).

These findings highlight group presentations and projects as among the most prominent types of group work assigned to students. Collaborative work may also include quick ‘touchdown meetings’ with students, assembling and delegating group work, brainstorming, rehearsing, working on non-academic projects, or studying in proximity.

Convenience of space

On campus, students experience frustration and difficulty in finding spaces to work together on group projects (Turner, Welch, & Reynolds, 2013). Such frustrations are also shared by the students interviewed who often find it hard to locate group work spaces during certain times of the semester. In one case, a student stated that “it’s much easier to find an empty classroom and use it” (Student 3). With an increase in innovative and variable types of group work, the needs of students also evolve, requiring support for related activities (Turner, Welch, & Reynolds, 2013). The Inforum provides group study-hubs (on a first-come-first-serve basis) and two meeting rooms (to be reserved). These spaces can accommodate group sizes of two to five students.

The interviews determine that students often find it difficult to arrange a time to meet collectively as a group. In addition, they struggle to schedule meetings and book rooms (both convenient and known to all group members) at particular times. Since the Inforum is located centrally at the Faculty, it provides a convenient space for students to meet. This is suggested in the dialogue below:

Interviewer: Do you use the study hubs [points to them] to do your group work?
Student 1: Yeah, pretty frequently. I’m always in the library in between class and it’s really convenient as other group members are also at the iSchool [Faculty of Information] attending classes, so it’s just a good communal space. I like that multiple people can work at a table at a time. There’s no other convenient space in the Inforum that accomplishes that, except for the study rooms. But I guess there’s no other non-bookable space where you could sit around a table with a group, so that’s why I like the study hubs.
While the study-hubs are available for group collaboration, students also mentioned other areas where they conduct group work. This includes, but is not limited to, meeting rooms, empty classrooms, and the student lounge. To maximize convenience and efficiency, students have suggested establishing a system to monitor and book all available Inforum spaces.

Zones of Activity, Privacy, and Noise

In professional graduate programs, students require different spaces for group-based work. The student interviews reveal that spatial needs and reality do not always convene. Through personal preferences in selecting study spaces, students make distinctions of areas in the library for the purpose of individual or collaborative work. Students voiced their concern for group project noise levels as a distraction to other students. Since the study-hubs are located along the back windows, the echo specifically seemed to be of concern. Students from the study stressed a need for partitions or retractable walls/partitions in order to mitigate sound.

Figure 2. Study hub

Aesthetics and Feel

Students noted ambience as a key consideration for motivating positive study habits. Furthermore, they expressed their distaste for loud, dark, crowded, and claustrophobic spaces lacking power outlets and work surfaces. This is highlighted by one of the students:
“To get me into the mood to study, I like a place that is comfortable, quiet, spacious, and free from people with plenty of outlets and large table space. For study spaces, I like the lighting, [especially] good lighting directly above the work space.” (Student 3)

![Spatial movement diagram of the study hubs in the Inforum.](image)

Students did enjoy the overall spaciousness of the library and, in particular, the area allocated to each study-hub. Moreover, they appreciated the new, modern, open, and clean aesthetic of the Inforum, which seemed to encourage productivity and studying. In the spatial movement diagram below (Figure 3), students identified desirable and undesirable study-hubs. This was determined by their frequency of use, comfort, and other aforementioned factors. This diagram illustrates the student choices: yellow highlights the preferred hubs, while blue highlights the undesirable hubs.

While the students did not mention if they used the library’s print collection/stacks, the resources served as an environmental cue to study. When asked where they studied on campus, all three student-interviewee participants responded with the library. A balance between traditional library atmospheres and more informal, comfortable lounge areas was also a key recurring theme.

**Nature & Lighting**

Much of the Inforum’s new design employs a green colour scheme. There is an emphasis on nature, as it strives to bring ‘the outside’ into the library. In the Inforum, there are seven large floor-to-ceiling windows along the north-east wall, which provides a great amount of natural lightning. Additionally, the Inforum’s second level features a live plant wall and seed library.

“I like the lightning. It has really good lightning because it’s directly above you creating a great working spot … I also like being next to the big window when I’m doing work. Otherwise, I get a little claustrophobic. The reason I don’t use the meeting rooms all the
time is because they are quite small if you have a large group and they don’t have windows” (Student 3).

As noted by one student, the study-hubs have additional lighting which turn on automatically upon stepping onto the platform. This was especially useful at night as it helped the student stay awake. However, students also warned of the lighting’s potential glare on screens. They found that this could be minimized if there were pull-down screens or dividers.

**Furniture**

During the renovation of the Inforum, furniture was tested prior to arrangement in the library. The study-hub includes a raised platform by each window along the north-east wall. Each hub includes a pentagon-shaped table, two outlets, and cushioned seats (highlighted in Figure 2). One of the main concern students made clear about study-spaces was the need for a variety of comfortable, adjustable, and mobile furniture. This is deemed especially important for collaborations, as group work differs in each assignment and/or course. In this regard, one student noted the lack of support:

“They [study-hubs] are not super practical. I feel like just a regular table with chairs around it would be more practical because you can choose the way you want to set up the space, like how many chairs you want around a table” (Student 1).

Additionally, students felt that the space was underutilised when there were so few group members occupying the large hub space. When reflecting upon possible solutions, they suggested that study-hubs could be expanded or re-arranged to make better use of the space; this includes using mobile and flexible workstations, furniture, and equipment.

**Comfort and Accessibility**

Based on the interview process, students clearly indicated that the study-hubs lacked comfort, flexibility, and accessibility. All students agreed that the hubs were not ergonomic. Even with the soft cushion seating, students found them uncomfortable to sit in for a long period of time.

“I also like that they [study hubs] can be comfortable. I say can be because depending on which [hub] you’re in the table is different distance from the seat...so sometimes you can be in one that can be uncomfortable because you can’t reach the table while you have your back against the cushion” (Student 1).

Similarly, all students expressed their frustration with the current workspace which did not have adjustable seats and tables. The distance between the table and chairs posed some discomfort, because
they were often ‘too far apart’ (Student 2). This was especially evident for the two most outer hubs, which are meant to be accessible for persons with disabilities. As stated in the interviews, students tended not to use these two particular hubs; however, during peak hours in the library, they did become a ‘last resort’. To adjust the comfort of the seats, one student mentioned the additional seat cushions from ‘iRelax’, a meditation space within the Inforum. It offers yoga mats, mediation cushions, stools, and noise-cancelling headphones, so as to reduce stress and increase focus (Figure 4). Overall, in group study spaces, students look for ergonomic designs, functionality, and furniture comfort and support, with plenty of room to spread out materials and belongings.

![Figure 4. iRelax area in the Inforum](image)

**Partition**

When it comes to group work, students noted that “the [two] meeting rooms of the Inforum [are] always the preference” (Student 2). The study-hubs have potential, but certain modifications were mentioned as desirable: semi-enclosed glass dividers, pull-down screens, and retractable walls or partitions. These suggestions were specifically made by one student:

“When you have a door you could close, you feel less restricted of volume, talking, and it can be easier to get things done with less distractions” (Student 2).

Group collaboration requires students to converse with one another. In designing group spaces,
this should be taken into account. The library should create a comfortable space for students to interact and engage.

**Collaborative Technologies**

To communicate and work collaboratively, students mentioned they used a variety of information technologies to support their group work, including Google Suite, Facebook messenger, and course-specific applications and programs. While the study-hubs are not attached to any mobile or electronic devices, students enjoy the opportunity to use their personal laptops in such a space. The Inforum Library does provide fast internet access, as well as outlets for personal devices at each hub. Since group work often involves the use of these technologies, students felt it would be beneficial to have a pull-down presentation screen and/or projector at each hub to support their work (i.e. collective researching and essay writing, presentation run-throughs, and group meetings).

**Conclusions and Further Research Questions**

Library spaces contribute to the university’s overall aim for providing high-quality learning. This ethnographic study explores how students use designated study-hubs in a library space for group work and collaboration. The challenges observed, such as flexibility of space, privacy, comfort, and aesthetics, often impede student practices.

Based on student feedback, it is important to recognize and engage users of the library in the process of renovating spaces and rethinking services. Evidently, spaces that are compatible with study goals and user preferences translate into real learning and collaboration. As a result, there is an overwhelming desire for space and technology to conduct collaborative study. Students made it clear that the library needs to adapt its spaces and services to a new paradigm of the academic library. The red thread of information is emergent in informational learning spaces. Research on library space (and its usage) can directly impact deep learning in academic institutions.
References


