

Considerations for Cultural and Social Spaces in University Library

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Abstract

This paper explores my thoughts on a research project, how social and cultural conditions play a major role in students' life, and influences the social and cultural practices of the university library usage at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) Manukau Campus. This research will examine the students' use of the library and the study space in and around the campus.

This qualitative research is a case study to explore the library usage at the Manukau Campus. The exploration will be based on the interviews with my library colleagues and academic staff, including focus group methods with students, and observation of the influences on social and cultural practices on a university library usage at the Manukau Campus.

The paper concludes that, while planning or redeveloping libraries, one needs to consider the social and cultural impact of spaces for students of different ethnicities and how these support peer learning, create a sense of belonging, encourage student retention, and contribute to increasing enrolment at the university.

Key words: Family, Culture, Language, Pasifika, Social Space, Technology.

Introduction

Higher education needs to provide students with the information and training to take up employment in positions where future learning would derive from on-the-job training

and experience. Now-a-days employers are looking for graduates to have extensive knowledge of their field and also know how to apply that knowledge, as individuals and as part of a team, and how to keep that knowledge up to date (Dalziel, 2013). In universities learning is increasingly seen as a collaborative process among faculty and students. In response to these ideas, faculty has turned away from relying on exams and papers and are assigning more group projects to students. These group projects allow students to negotiate their ideas collaboratively, and reflect on the process of knowledge creation (Gayton, 2008). The prevailing educational culture encourages learning through activity, reflection and conversation (Scottish Funding Council, 2006). These changes in Higher Education have impacted on library services, such as demand for library buildings, as places where patrons of the academic community can access information in a variety of formats, and make use of a range of learning environments (Antell & Engel, 2006) while Black and Roberts (2006) argue that new technology is actually energizing libraries in this era.

This is true, as academic libraries in New Zealand, and many universities around the world are investing in the refurbishment of existing facilities, and in some cases the development of new ones like University of Auckland information commons, AUT North Shore Campus, Manukau Institute of Technology. Many public libraries in New Zealand, Australia, Europe, America, and in some parts of the world, are trying to renovate or build new library buildings keeping the social and cultural factors in consideration.

The current New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015 states that the Government expects universities to create and share new knowledge that contributes to New Zealand's economic and social development and environmental management, as well as build a productive skills base to drive economic growth (Ministry of Education, 2012). "A combination of a rapidly changing digital world landscape, 24/7 electronic

access to information and a changing workforce are a few of the key factors currently impacting on the tertiary library” (Department of Labour, 2011, p.171).

AUT brands itself as a University for the changing world, an increasingly powerful force for learning and discovery, and is known for its high quality learning experience, inspired by innovative teaching that promotes both educational and career success, and is stimulated by research that advances intellectual debate, discovery and change (Auckland University of Technology, 2012). AUT’s primary focus is the education of its students, their learning experience and their success and creating a vibrant academic learning community by increasing resources, support, facilities, technology and infrastructures for research.

AUT has four-campus located in different parts of Auckland city. The libraries are informal places which support students' learning. One of the objectives stated in AUT Strategic Plan 2012-2016 is to “extend research activity and capability across the University” by “increasing resources, support, facilities, technology and infrastructure for research”(Auckland University of Technology, 2012) with student numbers on Manukau Campus forecast to reach 5,000 EFTs by 2020.

In New Zealand, one third of the Pasifika population live in the Maukau that, before Auckland’s supercity was created, was known as Manukau City. Sixty percent of New Zealand’s population growth between 2006 and 2031 will be in the Auckland region. By 2021, the Auckland region will have not just the largest overall population, but the highest growth rate and the largest number and growth of Maori, Pasifika and young people (15-39 year olds). According to Statistics New Zealand (2013) by 2031 the population of Manukau is expected to grow to half a million.

Students can learn at paces, times and places of their own choosing (Hill & Lee, 2009) and this impacts on universities and libraries as they need to provide the necessary

expertise and support to facilitate these changes. The importance of the role of libraries is adding value to learning and teaching within their institutions has always been recognised and this has become even more important with the greater emphasis in New Zealand and other parts of the world on funding models based on student completion rates (Ministry of Education, 2012). As teaching models in universities change and move towards blended models of online and face-to-face teaching, libraries need to adapt to ensure their services remain relevant (Vandenabeele, 2008).

Keeping Bennett's words (2006) in mind the planners of AUT should endeavor to understand the learning culture of one's own institution and how it may resonate with and differ from the cultures of other colleges and universities across New Zealand. As of now, to my knowledge there has been literature of how libraries facilitate access to a range of opportunities for students and I am not aware of any research that considers the way libraries shape students' capacity to adjust to their studies, lives of their children and the sociospatial characteristics of their community. There is an entire volume of literature on improving the physical environment for learning in higher education, and design and implementation of learning spaces but it is unknown whether social and cultural spaces in university library are available. Filling this knowledge gap is the first step toward determining whether considerations for social and cultural spaces in university library will have an impact on retention of students, collaborative learning, sense of belonging etc. I hope this study will provide different kinds of spaces, patrons would find ones that were suitable for them, or favourable to their own learning styles.

Purpose of the Study

I am a librarian at the AUT University. Every second week I visit AUT Manukau Campus library to liaise with the staff and research scholars and to help the students in their research. The Bachelor of Pasifika education is one of the degrees is being offered at

Manukau Campus. I have noticed more mature students along with young students study the Pasifika education degree. I have been noticing for the past few years how the students use the library and the study space in and around, and observed that social and cultural conditions play a major role in student life on Manukau Campus, and affect the use of the library services and facilities. I noticed the families of the students' community visit the library and even fathers and brothers of some families accompany the young mature women, when they do their study and research, particularly during school holidays and after schools, because of cultural beliefs. This situation and observation of students encouraged me to undertake this research. Therefore, it is not the space allocated to books which is critical; it is the space that is allocated to students and their families of the Manukau Campus that is important.

The Manukau Campus is the subject of this paper because it is a new campus and the library is likely to be developed significantly in the next few years. This region of Manukau has different demographics from the rest of Auckland in the following aspects:

- ✚ the student population is younger,
- ✚ the students tend to be the first from their families to attend the university,
- ✚ many of the students are from less well-off backgrounds, and
- ✚ the students include a high proportion of Maori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) and Pasifika people (mainly Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands, Niuean, Fijian, Tokelauan, and Tuvaluan) (Spiller, 2012) from Pasifika families who have immigrated to New Zealand over the last 60 years or so.

These people from the Pasifika Islands are mainly Polynesian and while their languages are similar, and they also have some differences. Pasifika people are not homogenous and states the term ‘ Pasifika’ does not refer to a single ethnicity, nationality, gender, language or culture (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Maori and Pasifika students are of a different culture than any other ethnic groups on Manukau Campus. Culture can be defined as the knowledge, values, attitudes, and traditions that guide the behavior of a group of people to allow them solve the problems of living in an environment (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993). Cultural differences do impact on learning and teaching, and librarians should be aware of the specific cultural backgrounds of the students. Amituna'i-Toloa, (2013) study mentioned deep within the students' culture, experience, and upbringing are the hindrances/factors/barriers preventing the students of Maori and Pasifika to perform well in studies and the library is one of the informal place which supports the students learning.

To meet the needs of these library students, it is important that the library is both easily accessible and aesthetically pleasing. The library should be a place for cultural, ethnic, generational, multicultural and digitized students. The aim is to create comfortable, lively, and active spaces where students can interact with each other and where support is available for the use of library resources and relevant technology to access these resources (Lewis, 2007). By offering these socio-cultural spaces, the library can act as a campus crossroads, allowing students from different disciplines to mix, discuss, share interests, and work collaboratively in using the library collection and resources.

This paper outlines some areas of concern regarding making the University Library more socially and culturally accommodating. At this stage there seems to me to be at least three cultural factors, and three social factors that have implications on student's library usage.

Cultural factors

The three cultural factors likely to have implications on the library usage are: Language, Family, and Values and Beliefs. These will be now discussed in detail.







Language

Maori and Pasifika students in New Zealand have a range of cultural and language identities. Pasifika people born in their home islands are much more likely to speak their own language than those born in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2010). The statistics show that more than 60 per cent of Sāmoans and Tongans living in New Zealand can hold an everyday conversation in their respective Pasifika languages.

Tuafuti and McCaffery (2005) claim that raising Pasifika students' self-esteem, self-discipline, and self identity requires the inclusion of Pasifika language and cultural considerations in all aspects of Pasifika students' education.

Immigrants of Pasifika origin whose first language is not English may not have had the chance to develop academic English literacy to a level that allows them to engage in tertiary study, use the library, access subject specific databases or benefit from information literacy workshops.

The possible implications might be the provision of non-English language resources:

-  to support with academic writing,
-  instruction on search strategies,
-  bilingual books,
-  help with translation software,
-  assistance with language learning, and
-  availability of bilingual language librarians.

Family

Maori and Pasifika people are family oriented. Education is of vital importance to Pasifika and Maori families, but family takes precedence over everything. Some students

have responsibilities such as looking after siblings, moving uncle's furniture, and attending weekend church camps (Ng Shiu, 2011).

By bringing the families to the library spaces, engaging Pasifika and Maori families in their learning prove successful (Education Review Office, 2012). Consequently, these places are even more important in creating better student library spaces suggests the parents' desire to help the students learning and has a direct impact on family relationships among students. Making library premises more like a good family is the key to Pasifika and Maori success. This means good strong boundaries, fair and approachable librarians and lots of positive strokes for any sign of success. Having said all that, the sociocultural places work well for all students, work extra well for Pasifika and Maori students.

This concept is supported by Amituanai-Toloe, McNaughton, Lai and Airini (2009) who suggests the Pasifika students find meaning in their education through serving their family with their education. Students view their success in education as a way to serve their family and community (Amituanai-Toloe et al., 2009). Believing in them, encouraging them, providing them with a sense of belonging, accepting them for who they are, they reciprocate with a desire and motivation to be more for their family, and community.

Some students consider the library as an extension of the home and therefore wish to bring other family members with them to the library

- ✚ this may be because they do not have access to child care facility,
- ✚ they feel more comfortable in groups, and
- ✚ their societies are concerned with the protection of girls.

These factors suggest a need to set up associated spaces in which family members can relax and enjoy themselves without disturbing other library users (Aabo & Audunson, 2012). Many students in their first year of university study, place a higher value on social and communal learning than on individual learning, and therefore seek out areas in the

library that accommodate group learning activities; this implies the need for providing group learning spaces.

Values & Beliefs

Pasifika and Maori students respect elders and librarians and listen to instructions and follow what is said, but tend not to ask questions. On the other hand, other ethnic groups, in particular Europeans, treat librarians and teachers as “ordinary” people like their parents from whom they can make demands or disagree.

In library course workshop librarians need to be aware of different cultural practices. These include:

- ✚ not sitting on study tables,
- ✚ provide discussion time as questions are more likely to emerge from groups rather than individuals, and
- ✚ be prepared to follow up enquiries as these students are more inclined to approach the librarian outside of classes because of their cultural belief, not to ask questions to clarify their doubts during class (Beaver & Tuck, 1998).

The implications of these ideas for librarians might include organising group work in information literacy workshops and in using the helpdesk.

Social factors

The three social factors that seem to have implications for the library usage are:

Age, Socioeconomic status, Study Spaces.

Age

Quiroga, Matus, Crosby and Loyola (2006) reported age is an important factor for a significant proportion of university students who are returning to prepare for second

career options. Many of our Maori and Pasifika students belong to this category. These older students are likely to have different needs when compared to their teenage classmates, in terms of using the modern IT equipment in the library involving either direct or distance access. Young students entering universities, sometimes referred to as the “Google Generation”, expect information to be at their fingertips and often believe all information is (or should be) “free”. These young people have never known a world without the internet and many are unaware of the costs of library-sponsored content (Joint Information Systems Committee, 2008).

There is a general saying, if a female/mother gets the taste of education, then the whole family will get educated. I notice as in many higher educational institutions, women are slightly more visible than their male counterparts at AUT Manukau Campus (Foundation for Young Australians, 2011).

More than one in four Pasifika female students feel unsafe in their neighborhoods (Rashbrooke, 2013) and libraries have the potential to be a safe, supportive and appropriate amenity for teenage girls and women because the library is open till late and their parents/family could pick them up or could stay along with them in the library sociocultural space. So libraries thus can potentially give students a place to be that is safe and appropriately resourced.

Socioeconomic status

Manukau students of all nationalities tend to have a slightly lower socioeconomic status than the average Aucklanders. They have been positioned as working-class, a social and economic position which limits access to many kinds of resources. These students who come from poorer families tend, like more mature students, to have less access to educational resources, in particular those that involve information technology.

The notion of the ‘digital divide’ normally means that there are some people with access to information technologies the ‘haves’, and some people without this access, the ‘have-nots’ (Osunkunle, 2008). Socioeconomic status, cultural position and value-connected reasons play a decisive role in the context of the information divide. The provision of the latest technology that is interactive, efficient and within easy reach of support services will further enhance the student learning experience (McDonald, 2010) in the libraries.

Longstone, (2012) in her Ministry of Education Annual report mentioned that the system is still underperforming for Maori and Pasifika learners and learners from communities with significant social economic challenges. While our education system continues to underperform for these learners, we are not entitled to call ourselves world-class.

Study Spaces

Considerations for sociocultural spaces in the library is the main theme of this research project. Cheers, Eng and Postle, (2012) describe today’s space as a “digital ecosystem” and this is a place, created and supported by social and technical architecture where both physical and virtual worlds intermingle. These spaces facilitate the use of personalized and authentic pedagogies that provide students with context, flexibility, and accessibility.

The libraries of the future should not remain static, but be continually monitoring the environment in which they operate to ensure they are rethinking and restructuring to enable the provision of services that enhance the research, teaching and learning objectives of the institution they serve (Keiser, 2010).

The physical space of the library is worthy of attention for two reasons. Firstly the need to accommodate information technology. Secondly, the need to provide meeting places, learning spaces, inspirational spaces, and performative spaces and quiet study spaces not available in busy homes, that accommodate a broad range of students, beyond particular service provisions.

Redevelop the library as the primary informal learning space on the campus. In the process partnerships with other campus units that support research, teaching and learning should be developed. Keiser (2010) believes there should be a new way of thinking about space and the way librarians employ their expertise. The transition from print to electronic resources should provide library space and most of the space to be redeveloped and traded to develop relationships with other campus organizations, such as teaching and learning centers or writing centers, that enhance the library's mission.

Librarians are trying to accommodate the user needs by linking them to the library's educational mission to construct and renovate new academic library spaces. Patrons want to study, work, socialize and attend events in a place that is majestic, innovative, 'cool, or memorable (Wedge & Blackburn, 2009). Many libraries are developing spaces that are conducive to group work and involve partnerships with writing centers and other campus groups focused on student success.

In terms of Information Technology the possible implications might be to provide

- ✚ more computers and access points,
- ✚ free information technology access,
- ✚ multimedia equipment (including associated hardware and software),
- ✚ free internet,
- ✚ free printing, and
- ✚ provide multiple copies of prescribed textbooks (both electronic and print).

In terms of required space, consideration needs to be given to the design of these considering mainly three areas: the physical space, interior design, furniture and other facilities, together with anticipated activities and behavioral patterns of the students (Nolen, Powers, Zhang, Xu, Cannady, & Li, 2012).

Such design considerations might include provision of

- ✚ group spaces to support new ways of learning,
- ✚ silent areas for revising and relaxing,
- ✚ eating spaces to allow them to spend long hours in the library, and
- ✚ a café with long hours or take away facility.

Szekely (1998 as cited in Smith, 2008) contends that ‘libraries need big conversation areas where people can study and flop on the floor and have it be user friendly’ (p.23) and have music areas, video screens, and places where students can sit, and relax, and where silence is not an issue.

Mandel (2013) mentioned that a well-designed space is one of the most important services an academic library can offer. The possible space implications suggest a consideration of the library architecture and the need to hear the views of students along with the library staff to create the required spaces.

A provisional position

To research the above issues, I expect to begin with a literature review and find if these issues have arisen and possible ways in which have been addressed elsewhere. My intention is to research this topic by using culturally appropriate methods, including focus group methods with students, interviewing academic staff and library colleagues who work at Manukau Campus.

My belief is that in all multicultural and multiclass societies experience similar differences and beliefs and my hope is that my research results will encourage others to look more deeply into their own local situations.

I am also hoping that my findings will be adopted by my university as they are planning to make changes to library policies and to the library as the university campus at Manukau develops.

This research project might also help other university libraries around the world, while planning or redeveloping libraries, and have designated social and cultural spaces for their students of different ethnicities.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor, Associate Professor. Andy Begg, for his invaluable support and encouragement given to write this conference paper.

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