Article Title: Learning Spaces in Academic Libraries – A review of the evolving trends.

Journal: Australian Academic and Research Libraries

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Abstract
This review presents a contextual overview of professional conversations regarding the evolution of learning spaces in academic libraries. It traces the genealogy of contemporary academic library trends to demonstrate how learning spaces evolved from learning commons, which in turn, evolved from the information commons. This activity is primarily guided by an effort to make connections and distinctions between different academic library models clearly visible. By acknowledging differing historical factors, purposes, pedagogical influences, and attributes of different library models we are better able to recognise shifts and emerging trends. Furthermore, we are also better equipped to appreciate and demonstrate the evolution and advancements of library and information science (LIS) in the context of higher education.

Key Words
Information commons; Learning commons; Academic Library;
**Introduction**

The whole nature of tertiary education is undergoing massive change and with it, the nature of academic libraries. While the outcomes of the changes are unclear, professional literature offers some evaluation of the changes being undertaken and some glimpses of the future.

**Problematic definitions**

The terms learning spaces, learning commons, and information commons have often been used interchangeably within the arena of library and information management studies and in practice. This interchangeability reflects the evolving nature of these concepts but also acknowledges that each share some common and overlapping features. Lippincott’s (2009) explanation suggests that ‘The concept of an information commons is slippery – it means different things in different institutions – and there [are] no commonly accepted definitions among those who manage information commons or those who study them’ (p. 18). While Lippincott argues that differing library spaces get conflated under the ‘information commons’ umbrella due to a lack of definitional consensus, Milewicz (2009) believes this is inconsequential, because: ‘a library by any other name is still a library’ (p. 14). Milewicz (2009) devalues the use of labels for representational purposes, arguing that features are more important as it’s these that indicate a certain philosophy (p. 6). Harland (2011) agrees: ‘Whether you call it a learning commons, an information commons, a research commons, a media center, or a library does not matter’ (p. xiii). For Harland, what matters is that the information and learning commons provide a common goal – a centralised information service and assistance hub to meet the research, teaching, and learning needs of the wider University community.
Of course, Lippincott, Milewicz and Harland do not suggest that academic libraries have remained unchanged since the information commons model emerged in the mid-1990s. But they do argue that changes in academic library models since this time do not signify a fundamental break from the information commons concept. As Milewicz (2009) suggests: ‘Rather than signalling a shift in direction, the recent attention to learning [in academic libraries] heralds a re-dedication to the partnership and philosophies on which the information commons was founded’ (p. 11). However, as library spaces evolve it should be anticipated that the terms used to describe those new spaces will also change. Thus the varying appellations that Lippincott, Milewicz and Harland believe to be synonymous with information commons may well be evidence of library spaces whose changing arrangements represent a progressive shift from the information commons model. For after all, academic libraries are not stagnant places; they are dynamic, constantly evolving physically and conceptually.

**Why definitions are necessary**

Bailey and Tierney (2008) advocate the need for information professionals to accept, support and nourish change and innovation in libraries. Rather than perceiving the use of different labels to describe different models as ‘change for change sake’, as suggested by Lippincott, Milewicz and Harland, labels can serve an important representational function in discussing LIS models and concepts with greater accuracy, authenticity and currency. However, this notion hinges on the extent that participants of professional discussions hold shared understandings of the concepts represented by such labels.

**Why information and learning commons are often conflated**

Rather than perceiving a lack of definitional consensus to be problematic, Forrest and Halpert (2009) argue that the varied labels used to describe library models are advantageous
allowing for greater flexibility of localised interpretations and customisation. For many of the authors discussed above the information commons is an umbrella term, a short-hand terminology that describes a range of library attributes. While these attributes may not be reflected in all information common models within libraries, their differences are resolved by the fact that they share a common ambition.

The variations of the term information commons to which Forrest and Halpert (2009) refer include those previously identified by authors such as Somerville and Harlan (2008), such as: information hub, information village, information arcade, knowledge navigation centre, cybrary, information gallery, electronic information centre, research commons, technology commons, knowledge commons, and academic commons. Some variations on the term information commons are arguably more intuitive than others, but more importantly how helpful and meaningful are these label variants to the patrons who frequent these spaces? If these labels are not useful signposts to their constituents and staff then Milewicz is absolutely correct; the features of a library space become more important than labels in demonstrating an underlying philosophy. Nevertheless, obscurity persists when professional conversations turn to discussions about underlying library philosophies. Is it a fair assumption that each participant is discussing an information commons?

**Removing the information commons umbrella**

Roberts (2007) suggests the tendency to describe a learning commons as an information commons may reflect an understanding of learning commons as a logical extension of the information commons model (p. 805). Nevertheless, Roberts argues that this tendency should not obscure the fact that these trends represent distinct paradigms noted by significant technological, pedagogical and spatial design differences (p. 805).
Such differences are for many a subtle distinction, and taken alone does not represent a break from the information commons ethos; rather they reaffirm the importance of libraries to support learning and knowledge creation. Despite the evident overlap between information and learning commons as descriptions of library spaces, other LIS professionals have explored further differences between these models.

Somerville and Harlan (2008) highlight the historical situatedness of information commons, learning commons and learning spaces; they view learning commons as the second iteration of information commons and learning spaces as its third (p. 3). Bonnanda and Donahuea (2010) also trace the evolution of learning commons from the information commons trend: ‘The concept of learning commons has evolved with more complexity than its predecessor, the information commons’ (p. 231). Accardia, Cordova and Leeder (2010) describe this evolutionary progression as an evolution of the idea of the learning commons, ‘...to its present incarnation as a vibrant, collaborative, technology-infused space’ (p. 312).

Holmgren (2010) also discusses the distinction between information commons and learning commons in evolutionary terms: ‘Although similar in name to the information commons, the learning commons reflects a marked shift in our conception of the library, a shift that is driven by our evolving understanding of the library’s role in supporting student learning’ (p. 177). Heitsch and Holley (2011) concur arguing that Learning Commons can be seen as an evolution of the Information Commons which is marked by the shift from an instructional learning environment to one focused on self-directed learning and the creation of knowledge. (p. 3)

Towards definitional distinctions
In recognising that some information management professionals distinguish between information commons, learning commons and learning spaces, whilst others do not, the task of providing a generally accepted definition for these terms is problematic. As has been suggested, fuzzy rather than fixed borders mark what is included in each library model. There is a necessarily subjective aspect to the problem of strict definition that becomes most notable where professionals in the field take an ‘umbrella’ view. Nevertheless, those who persist with the work of teasing out significant differences offer accounts in the literature that differentiate between information commons, learning commons and learning spaces in academic libraries. It is fruitful to consider these definitions provided by librarians and information professionals.

**Defining learning commons: a social approach**

The debate about the use of the term information commons is informed by the notion that there are indeed essential elements that differ to definitions that are provided for learning commons. One of the fundamental differences between these terms is the notion that the learning commons more readily reflects the understanding that students, as learners, are not merely information consumers but actively participate with information in order to create meaningful knowledge and wisdom. This is a critical shift from the purpose of the information commons.

Bennett (2003) highlights this shift by maintaining that while an information commons empowers ‘knowledge seeking’, learning commons facilitates the creation of knowledge and sometimes wisdom. Learning and knowledge creation is supported and enhanced as learning commons seeks to connect people through shared learning tasks such as group assignments.
where students can take control and ownership over their own learning. As Bennett (2003) explains:

‘The core activity of a Learning Commons…. would be built around the social dimensions of learning and knowledge and would be managed by students themselves for learning purposes that vary greatly and change frequently’ (p. 38).

**Defining learning commons: institution-centric**

Bailey and Tierney (2008) identify yet another point of difference between the information and learning commons models, arguing that while an information commons provides a ‘continuum of service’ and provides some non-traditional library services, it remains largely if not entirely library-centric. The learning commons on the other hand is more seamlessly integrated within the library itself as well with the wider institution and thus is ‘not library-centric’ (p. 3). Bailey and Tierney argue that learning commons are more likely to incorporate other student support services which traditionally operate externally to the library (e.g. study and learning centres which provide assistance with exam study skills, writing and grammar skills, oratory skills, etc.). The integrated character of the learning commons model is representative of a change in the library’s strategic direction, one that is, ‘…clearly and explicitly aligned strategically with the institution-wide vision and mission’ (p. 3).

Somerville and Harlan (2008) also discuss the integrative aspect of the learning commons as a distinctive feature. While the information commons paradigm typically involved partnerships with IT staff specifically, the learning commons model extends this partnership program through cross-disciplinary and cross-campus collaboration with pedagogy experts,
subject coordinators, and writing experts for example, to further facilitate knowledge creation (p. 8). Some collaborative projects would seek to embed literacy and research skills development in curriculum design, as well as collaborate on learning management systems (e.g. Moodle, Blackboard, etc.). Therefore, Somerville and Harlan view the learning commons model as more active and involved with the wider institution and more orientated towards supporting the university’s mission in contrast with the information commons model. Bennett (2008) also supports this view, stating that ‘...the fundamental difference between the information and the learning commons is that the former supports institutional mission while the latter enacts it’ (p. 183).

Defining learning spaces

In teasing out some of the characteristics of learning spaces in academic libraries, Somerville and Harlan (2008) attribute the provision of many different types of spaces that encourage social interactions and knowledge exchange to facilitate and support learning. They state that: “learning spaces ... acknowledg[e] the essential social dimension of knowledge and learning (p. 3). It is in recognition of this understanding that Somerville and Harlan view learning spaces in academic libraries as a ‘third iteration of the Commons concept’ (p.3).

The learning spaces model furthers the mission of the learning commons by providing various formal and informal flexible learning spaces that better facilitate learning. This shift in direction is inspired by the understanding that spatial designs influence learning behaviours. As Oblinger (2006) states, ‘Space—whether physical or virtual—can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration,
and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness’ (p. 1.1).

The importance of spatial designs that encourage and support dynamic, engaged and inspired learning behaviours is a fundamental feature of the learning spaces trend. Matthews, Andrews and Adams (2011), discuss how the design of ‘spaces’ inspires particular behaviours before then turning to discuss the pedagogical roots and philosophical influences of learning spaces in academic libraries: The impact of ‘spaces’ becomes more prominent as pedagogical practices in higher education start to move away from the traditional, teacher-centred approach to a more flexible, student-centred approach (p. 107).

For Somerville and Harlan (2008), the pedagogical underpinnings of learning spaces in academic libraries is an important consideration because it is this idea which fundamentally distinguishes it from the information and learning commons trends. They assert that, ‘learning spaces’ convey an image of the institution’s philosophy about teaching and learning’ (p. 17) and highlight the need for academic libraries to reflect new directions in educational philosophies. They connect the changing ideas in library design concepts and changing pedagogies which enable ‘discovery that provide students with ‘knowledge making’ experiences transferable to lifelong learning’ (p. 3).

Keating and Gabb (2005) not only demonstrate the advantages to student learning in providing a range of formal and informal learning spaces, but also describe the variety of collaborative and independent spaces needed to promote self-directed learning. Paul Soderdahl (2011) provides a complementary but more detailed description of informal spaces within the learning spaces model, particularly focussing on the concept of informal spaces. Soderdahl’s description demonstrates that the learning spaces trend is discussed in
LIS literature using interchangeable terms, yet the description allows us to visualise what these spaces may involve. From Soderdahl’s descriptions we can imagine that a learning space may be an enclosed room with integrated hi-tech equipment and ergonomic furniture designed to accommodate collaborative learning styles. Alternatively, a learning space may be a more informal ‘diner’ inspired partitioned booth with a large HD flat screen monitor and wireless technology, or simply an outdoor space with wireless interconnectivity. Learning spaces may also simply be a group of people discussing an issue on couches in an open space, or a group working together around a large table assembled from smaller individual portable tables inside or outside the library building. The development of the learning spaces concept within academic libraries is about providing more varied spaces to accommodate and support the differing needs and preferences of different communities of learners.

Another point of differentiation with the learning and information commons trend as exhibited by learning spaces is the move towards the academic library becoming the cultural epicenter of the university. As Somerville and Harlan state:

‘In leading the transformation from classrooms to learning spaces... innovations for teaching and learning must move beyond the comfortable ‘one-stop service centre’ to become the ‘heart of the university’ teaching and learning environment that brings together students, faculty, technologists, librarians, writing tutors, instructional designers, and other key stakeholders’ (p. 18).

The definitions discussed
In many of the descriptive accounts outlined above it is evident that there are overlapping attributes and features of information commons, learning commons and learning spaces. As noted, this is an inevitable overlap given that the borders between these concepts are not fixed and can shift subjectively. What Somerville and Harlan (2008) identify as being peculiar to learning spaces (i.e. providing formal and informal collaborative spaces that reflect new teaching and learning pedagogies in higher education), others (i.e. Bennett) discuss as a feature of the learning commons. Many LIS scholars also talk of ‘learning spaces’ as a characteristic of the learning commons paradigm. For instance Milewicz (2009) writes: ‘Recent years have seen another stage in the evolution of information commons spaces with the emergence of the learning commons and its sharper focus on creating learning spaces’ (p. 10). This notion is perhaps even more pronounced within a descriptive account of learning commons provided by Doiron and Asselin (2011), which pulls in many attributes that others use to specifically describe learning spaces. They describe learning commons as:

‘...a dynamic, collaborative learning environment ... It combines individual and group study spaces, in-depth reference services, and instruction from ... librarians and information technology staff... these re-conceptualized learning spaces are understood as ‘community gathering points’ which offer students support in writing, technology use and research, and usually include some sort of social space such as a café and a lounge’. (p.229)

Both Doiron & Asselin (2011) and Somerville & Harlan (2008) discuss the learning commons in terms of the library’s changing role in higher education, one that transforms its traditional role as a provider of information to a facilitative role. This change emphases the provision of
more innovative, integrated, convenient, practical, and holistic services to further support
and encourage learning, teaching and research within universities.

However, Somerville and Harlan suggest that an increased awareness of the social aspect of
learning is more pronounced within the learning spaces model because of its focus on
providing a variety of both formal and informal study spaces: ‘learning space[s] ...
accommodates formal as well as informal and technology-based learning’ (p. 21-22).
Bennett’s account of learning commons as described in this review does not identify
informal and formal collaborative spaces as a key feature of the learning commons. Perhaps
then, we can consider this to be a credible point of difference between the two models.

Another point of differentiation from the information and learning commons and learning
spaces is captured by Somerville and Harlan’s notion that learning spaces are socially
transforming academic libraries into becoming the ‘heart of the university’. This concept
supports Freeman’s idea that: ‘Within the institution, as a reinvigorated, dynamic learning
resource, the library can once again become the centerpiece for establishing the intellectual
community and scholarly enterprise’ (Freeman 2005, p. 3).

**Historical context**

The first iterations of the information commons emerged in academic libraries in the mid-
1990s (Beagle 1999; Heitsch and Holley 2011; Sullivan 2010) with the advent of the World
Wide Web. Advances in information technology during this time revolutionised the way
people exchanged and accessed information. Demas (2005) acknowledges that during the
early days of the IT revolution many believed that digital information available on the
Internet would gradually replace books leading to ‘deserted libraries’. It was in response to
this very fear; this professional existential crisis, that Bonnanda and Donahuea (2010) argue that the ‘libraries as space movement began’ (p. 226).

A number of writers suggest that the primary definition of the information commons is that of shared physical space (Smith, 2011; Somerville & Harlan, 2008). This sharing typically brings together the library reference space and the IT services which in the past have been quite separate. Another approach suggests that the information commons is not only a reformulation of the physical space but also the conceptual space in response to the need to adapt to changing digital access and research methods (Remy, 2004; Sullivan, 2010). While the idea of the instructional space has always been part of the academic library ethos, the development of the information commons has enable this idea of instructional space to be developed to include not only academic assistance but also research and IT assistance in a more integrated way (Sullivan, 2010). Bennett (2009) suggests that the development of the instructional space involves fundamental changes to the way that librarians and IT staff collaborate and that these partnerships offer a new set of student and staff instructional opportunities.

In the early 2000s, the learning commons model started becoming a topic of interest in LIS literature. In 2003, Bennett proposed that the learning commons model could charter a new direction for academic libraries. Bennett envisaged that the learning commons model would ‘realize the potential of the physical library building and... create the library of the future’ (Demas 2005, p. 39). Bennett perceived that the learning commons model would complement new teaching and learning pedagogies in higher education which had shifted ‘away from a teaching culture and toward a culture of learning’ (Bennet 2005, p. 10).
The new teaching and learning pedagogies in higher education were influenced by social constructivist learning theories (Matthews, Andrews, and Adams 2011) and self-discovery learning practices. These theories upheld the notion that, “the most significant learning takes place when individuals participate in social learning activities” (Matthews, Andrews, and Adams 2011, p. 12).

Sullivan (2010) demonstrates how academic libraries evolved to reflect these new teaching and learning directions:

“For the past decade, change in academic libraries has paralleled the reorientation of knowledge in higher education. Recently, in line with the emphasis on student-led inquiry and collaborative learning, the learning commons concept has resulted in a trend toward flexible designs and interactive spaces’ (p. 130).

The interest in designing spaces that encouraged learning in libraries heralded the learning spaces trend in academic libraries. Learning spaces in academic libraries, ‘...encourage students to invest more of their time in learning’ (Bennett 2007, p. 16). Bennett (2007) saw this challenge to libraries as reframing the issue, ‘...shifting from an apparent competition between study and socializing to a regulation of behaviours that are inextricably both academic and social in nature’ (p. 17). In addition to the attributes and characteristics of the learning spaces model, Bennett points to another underlying philosophy of learning spaces:

‘Learning spaces [are] designed to celebrate the accomplishments of learning – by exhibiting its products (scientific posters, engineering models, the results of research projects and independent study, etc.) or by offering performance venues (for talks, art exhibits, award activities, etc.) – will indicate that the
space is itself meant to occupy interest and stimulate intellectual activity’
(Bennett 2007, p. 22).

The importance of designing library spaces which are intellectually engaging and stimulating, as well as self-organising is discussed by Freeman (2005). He writes:

‘...we must not design space that is so generic or anonymous that it lacks the distinctive quality that should be expected for such an important building. The charge to architects is to create libraries that, themselves, learn. One key concept is that the library as a place must be self-organizing—that is, sufficiently flexible to meet changing space needs’ (p. 4).

It is in recognition of these library developments that Demas (2005) states that ‘academic libraries are transforming to become the new Alexandrias on their campus’ (p. 26). Demas suggests that libraries have come back to the fact that they are about people and learning and that the design of libraries is about seeking ‘...to restore parts of the library’s historic role as an institution of learning, culture, and intellectual community” (p. 25).

Conclusion

This review has examined scholarly literature that discusses learning spaces in academic libraries within a historical context. Central to this aim is an examination of difficulties associated with formulating a fixed and widely acceptable working definition. It has been argued that such difficulties reflect the evolving nature of academic library spaces as well as some overlap that reflects shared historical and conceptual features. Despite these challenges, it has been argued that there are significant differences that make it possible and productive to differentiate between information commons, learning commons and learning
spaces models. This review also has provided an historical context for those factors that led to the emergence of these spaces in academic libraries. By acknowledging distinctive historical factors, purposes, pedagogical influences and attributes we become better positioned to appreciate the significance of emerging trends in academic libraries.

Using information commons as an umbrella term for learning commons and/or learning spaces overlooks a large body of LIS literature that purposefully differentiates between these approaches to organising and conceptualising academic library spaces. Furthermore, to conflate these models disregards their historical contexts and the very different impetuses that caused these trends to emerge.
Academic libraries are not stagnant places; they are dynamic and constantly evolving physically, conceptually and philosophically. Learning spaces as an emerging trend in academic libraries represent how libraries and information professionals ‘...not only accept but also embrace change and innovation’ (Bailey and Tierney 2008, p. ix). This is one way that academic libraries are increasingly demonstrating how they are an active and innovative partner in the higher education enterprise. By finding ways to more completely accommodate different learning styles, needs and preferences, academic libraries more clearly demonstrate how they benefit their user groups and wider community. By becoming more learner-centric in their approach, as evidenced by the learning spaces trend, academic libraries reinstate their relevance to the teaching and learning enterprise. Continuing in this direction will no doubt ensure that academic libraries will never be ‘deserted places’, but more thriving social learning hubs. This idea points to future directions for academic libraries – directions that embrace more social aspects of learning to support excellence in research and scholarship, further securing the library’s position within the tertiary landscape.
References


