Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Ethnographic Study at a Music Library Found Students Prefer Short Stopovers and Longer Solitary Study

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Abstract

Objective – To identify patterns of patron behaviour in the library in order to improve space utilization.

Design – Ethnographic data-gathering, including observations and a qualitative survey.

Setting – Music library of a large public university.

Subjects – Library patrons, primarily music students but also music faculty, other students and faculty, and regional music professionals and amateurs.

Methods – In the exploratory phase, complete (i.e., incognito) participant observers recorded patron characteristics and behaviours in four zones of the library (the technology lab, the stacks, the reference area, and study carrels). They conducted a series of five-minute-long visual sweeps of these zones at five-minute intervals. Observers were not given any checklist, but were told to record anything they saw regarding the personal characteristics, behaviours, and activities of patrons. The data collected resulted in what the investigators called "flip books" (a series of images recorded in close succession, which, when flipped, could give the illusion of movement). The data was analyzed using the grounded theory approach, a qualitative method to identify recurring themes on space

use. A statistical analysis based on these themes was then conducted. In the second, explanatory phase, observers conducted new "sweeps," or observations of the same library zones, this time using checklists to indicate the occurrence of specific activities identified in the first phase (solo vs. group activity, social interaction vs. study discussion, and use of technology). In addition, observers recorded patron entry and exit on "time cards," and had all exiting patrons answer five brief questions about the types and volume of activities they had conducted in the various zones of the library.

Main Results – The vast majority of the patrons were students. Most (at least three-quarters) engaged in solitary activity, and a large majority used electronic technology. According to data from the flip books, 44% engaged in multitasking, which was therefore significant but not preferred. It was more likely to occur when electronic technology was involved. Patrons were most likely to be present in the library for less than 5 minutes or more than 20 minutes. Patrons who stayed in the library for only a short time were more likely to engage in leisure activities than those who stayed longer, but leisure activities overall were as prevalent as study time. The technology lab and the reference area were the most popular zones. Users stayed in the technology lab and stacks for short times only, whereas the reference area and carrels were favored for long visits. Users engaged in multitasking mostly in the carrels and reference area.

Conclusion – The patrons' preference for solitary study is at odds with academic libraries' current interest in collaborative learning spaces, but can be explained by the specific nature of music studies (artistic creation is a solitary activity), and is in line with previous ethnographic studies of public libraries. Music students presumably use the technology labs for short visits between classes. They favor the study carrels for longer stays where they can multitask, using their own laptops and iPods. These findings can be used to help redesign the library. Design recommendations include placing the

technology lab by the entrance to enable quick coming and going, increasing the number of carrels, placing them in quiet parts of the library, and equipping them with electrical outlets.

Commentary

This article adds to the growing body of qualitative research in library science using ethnographic methods. As the ERIAL project has shown, ethnographic methods can provide in-depth information about users' information behaviour. Such methods are "inductive and hypothesis generating" (Asher & Miller, n.d., p. 3). Accordingly, this study rightly aims to base space design on students' learning needs, rather than operational considerations (Bennett, 2005, p. 15).

The study was meticulously designed and implemented with the help of an ethnographer. The use of three different instruments allows for not only a detailed and nuanced analysis of patron behaviour in the library, but also a comparison of the validity and fruitfulness of the instruments. The research yielded a wealth of solid evidence about space use, which has interesting implications for the design of library spaces and service points. In particular, findings regarding the length of visits, the prevalence of solo activities, and the frequency of leisure activities complicate the widely held assumption of increasing demand for collaborative learning spaces in academic libraries. The authors mention some practical changes to improve space use at their institution, but more conclusions could be drawn from the findings.

Surprisingly, the article's literature review covers neither research on music libraries nor non-ethnographic studies of library spaces. Without a review of general research on library space use, it is not clear whether this article's findings are specific to music or even other departmental libraries. To better assess their finding of preference for solitary activity, for example, the authors could have relied on the extensive literature on "library as place" in addition to the ethnographic studies they

mention. Regardless of methodology, studies of undergraduates' solo vs. group study preferences have had mixed results (Applegate, 2009; Fox & Doshi, 2013; Treadwell, Binder & Tagge, 2012; Whitmire, 2001). It may be, as Fox and Doshi (2013) have concluded, that students value flexible space that allows for either group or individual study. Music students may well be different from others, but the authors' explanation that it is due to the nature of artistic creation does not rest on any evidence.

Another consequence of the weak literature review is that the authors occasionally present findings without discussing their significance. A good example is the importance of leisure activities in the library, which the authors point out but do not analyze, although it could affect space design.

Furthermore, as the authors admit, ethnographic research is time-consuming and complex to implement. It allows for "detailed and accurate results," but some of the findings could be ascertained without such an elaborate method, like the need for more carrels located in quiet area and equipped with electrical outlets. The authors say little of the culture of study in the music department and their university as whole, although library facilities are best designed when considered in their broader institutional context (Freeman, 2005, p. 7).

All in all, this study provides an excellent model for librarians interested in conducting an ethnographic study of space use. It presents different methods step by step and discusses benefits and drawbacks. But the article would benefit from in-depth analysis of the findings, rather than just the methodology.

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