

The Library as Third Place in Academe: Fulfilling a Need for Community in the Digital Age

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Abstract: Today's highly technological society is causing people to lose their personal connections and sense of community. In his book *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg identifies the need people have for a "third place" after home and work that provides for community interaction and socialization with others. In the academic community on college and university campuses, students, faculty and administrators are looking for a place on campus that provides a learning environment allowing a community of scholars to interact with one another. We contend that the library with its new mission as a center of learning and collaboration can truly become the heart of the campus or the third place within the university community. We will explore academic library services at two mid-sized publicly supported universities in Indiana, one a residential campus and one a commuter campus, to show how these two libraries are giving their own unique vision to a revised mission for libraries in the 21st century as a "third place" for students and scholars to meet, collaborate and socialize.

Introduction

In today's technological society people are losing their personal connections and sense of community. While in many ways the world has opened up as the Internet allows communication with people all over the world, it has also created a new kind of isolation. Individuals spend time on computers and cell phones, writing messages, searching for information, playing games or buying products in the privacy of their homes and offices. While these are valuable conveniences for our modern lives, something very special is lost; personal interaction with others. In his book *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg identifies the need people have for a third place after home and work that provides for community interaction and socialization. It is this physical place to congregate and socialize that is lacking from many lives. For most people the nuances of connection that come with face-to-face interaction cannot be fulfilled by computers or telecommunications. We need hearing, touching, body language, and the immediacy that being with other people provides.

In the academic community students, faculty, and administrators are looking for a place on campus that provides a learning environment allowing a community of scholars to interact with one another. While historically the library has been known as the heart of the campus, its traditional image is one of a quiet place where food and drink are forbidden, and where one goes to do solo reading and studying or to find books and journals. At the same time the relevancy of the traditional library as a physical presence on campus is beginning to be questioned due to philosophical and economic pressures. New library services, such as electronic access to information resources, virtual

reference, and online library instruction offer users alternatives to entering the library building. Campus administrators, struggling for ways to cut costs, wonder if a suite of electronic services is sufficient to replace the traditional library proper. “Why do we need a library building”, they ask, “when we can access so many resources and services online?” In response to this librarians are searching for ways to build community on campus by redefining the academic library environment.

Oldenburg’s Definition of Place

While the Internet can be a successful space to form learning communities where scholars and students virtually connect with one another, do we also benefit from an informal physical space in which to interact with our fellow scholars? Do we depend upon the intimacy of face-to-face connections and can the university library provide a forum for such interactions? We maintain that the library can be such a forum and propose that one way to create a successful environment for scholars is to consider Oldenburg’s ideas when designing library spaces. Oldenburg discusses several characteristics that he believes create the atmosphere that brings people together and provides us with a third place. These characteristics are:

- *Neutral Ground* – a place where individuals can come and go as they please and where no one plays host,
- *Leveling* – a place where there is no distinction between class, rank, and social position,
- *Communication* – a place where conversation is the main activity,
- *Accessibility & Accommodation* – a place that is open long hours; where activity is unplanned, unorganized, unscheduled, unstructured; and is in close proximity to home or neighborhood,
- *Regulars* – a place that is full of familiar faces,
- *Membership* – a place where new comers are welcome; a non-exclusive environment,
- *Mood* – a place where joy and acceptance reign over anxiety and alienation,
- *Home Away from Home* – a place that provides the feeling of being in a supportive, happy home.

Oldenburg provides examples of spaces that have these characteristics. There are the sidewalk cafés of France, the coffee houses of Vienna, the pubs of England, the German beer gardens, and in Japan there are teahouses. The American tavern is also a third place. It is a place we relate to the television program of a bar called Cheers “where everybody knows your name and they’re always glad you came”. What these places all have in common is that they are informal hangouts, second homes, and havens from the alienation of daily life; places to make conversation with others in a social-community space.

Library as Third Place

In many ways the perfect expression of a learning community in academe is akin to Oldenburg's concept of third place in that learning often occurs in a supportive, open environment where ideas are given primacy over rank and where argumentation is expressed within a framework of sincere collegiality. Can this type of open, unstructured, and supportive environment be found in the modern academic library? The traditional university library has always been a place that is open long hours and is easily accessible to the university community. It is a multi-purpose facility where every member of the community is welcome. It is frequented by regulars, who can come and go as they please, and where no one, central figure plays host. Thus the traditional university library already embodies some of the features of Oldenburg's third place. Because of this it is a natural place in which to develop his ideas further.

We will explore the environments of our respective academic libraries, the Helmke Library at Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne and the Cunningham Library at Indiana State University, looking at changes that have been and are being made that relate to Oldenburg's idea of third place. In doing so we are not attempting to force a rigid correlation between Oldenburg's characteristics and our libraries, but rather use his concept of third place as a background for examination.

Third Place in Academe

At our libraries we are making efforts to redefine space and make a more welcoming and comfortable environment. At the Cunningham Library café, the Cup & Chaucer, students choose from a wide variety of snacks and hot meals and are free to carry their food throughout the building. Or they can stay in the café and watch CNN on a wide screen TV, chat with their friends, or play chess and backgammon using game pieces provided by the library. In the same vein at Helmke Library students order pizza delivered to their study tables and also bring in food purchased on campus. This accepting attitude toward dining in the library helps to establish the open, friendly atmosphere Oldenburg speaks of for the third place. Sharing and eating food with others has always been a social act that establishes ties, elevates mood, and fosters conversation.

Helmke and Cunningham libraries have made several changes that provide patrons with pleasant and inviting surroundings in which to meet with others and work together on projects. At both libraries we've purposely removed many of our private study carrels, which tended to isolate people, and created areas with large group study tables. At Helmke we remodeled two of our floors to create large open spaces for patron use by eliminating small study rooms and tight, confined spaces, redecorated the areas with new carpeting and soothing colors, and recovered the upholstered chairs and ottomans in the lounges on each floor. At Cunningham we redecorated library space in pleasing colors and created an inviting environment with comfortable, plush furniture. The first floor is

an especially fluid space that is constantly reconfigured with movable walls and screens to accommodate community and social activities such as gaming tournaments, film series, symposia, impromptu group study, and casual gatherings. In both libraries we have added live plants, created additional casual seating areas, and beautified spaces with student art exhibits, framed posters and other artwork that add to creating a homey, cozy atmosphere.

Another way we create inviting environments is through the ease of access to computer technology. Helmke and Cunningham are part of campus-wide wireless networks, so students can comfortably use their laptops anywhere in our buildings. Both libraries also provide traditional computer workstations along with several collaborative computer areas that include multiple monitors and project software, enabling groups to work together.

Acknowledging that to be a space where our patrons interact for learning and for socializing, both libraries encourage conversation and spontaneous communication throughout the building with talking discouraged only in areas designated for quiet study. Our libraries welcome students to configure the furniture in any way they wish. Our users move the sofas and easy chairs into conversational groupings, pull up extra chairs to computers, or reposition tables to have access to electrical outlets. Since students are making the library space their own by having the opportunity to move the furniture and to use their laptops where they please, the third place as a leveler of status and rank is suggested. Students are invested in the library as a home away from home and tell us they feel like the library belongs to them.

Four years ago the Cunningham Library began hosting a daylong party with a carnivalesque atmosphere we call the Library Extravaganza. The purpose is to pull in users from the local and campus communities and acquaint them with our library in a fun, joyous way. This past year we served 3,500 hotdogs and bags of chips, 4,000 bags of freshly popped popcorn, and 4,000 cans of soda free of charge, from 10 AM to 3 PM. We had a live band, video games, raffles of prizes donated by local shops, free gifts, and local media coverage. Users talked with staff about resources and services but were also encouraged to enjoy the relaxed, fair-like atmosphere. Students were seen having picnics on the floor with their hotdogs while faculty joked and ate with the grounds crew. This event is the library's opportunity to let the community know that we can be a comfortable and inviting home away from home. Campus response to the Extravaganza is overwhelmingly positive and we have continually been asked to hold it each year. Like Oldenburg's third place, the Extravaganza is unstructured, and welcomes everyone, regardless of rank and status, to socialize in a fun environment.

One way that Cunningham extends this carnival atmosphere is to encourage many casual activities throughout the year like our X Box Gaming Tourney. At these events students sit on couches in front of 8-foot high screens scattered throughout the first floor of the library and experience the camaraderie of good-natured competition while enjoying free popcorn and drinks.

A New Paradigm

These new environments and user-centered activities we describe are only a few of the ways in which the library can serve as an important third place in academe. We find that using Oldenburg's concept of third place for building community in libraries is a valuable and useful tool; one that can break through traditional thinking patterns and assist librarians and administrators in developing innovative environments for learning. Surely if we are to foster communities on campus that address the isolation and alienation sometimes caused by the digital age, we need to look beyond the image of the library as a repository or archive and focus also on what it means for our users to belong, to be welcomed, safe, and nurtured. Oldenburg's third place is a social construct that can be applied to a learning community in which peers support, challenge, and teach each other. The library, as the heart of the campus, has great potential to be this progressive place.