"Teleporting" from boring to cool

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Mary Ellen Spencer makes the statement that if your library doesn't already have an information commons, chances are good that you are already planning for it. (Spencer,2006, p.242)

In the literature it is sometimes referred to as information commons, knowledge commons or learning centres and although the mission, definition and makeup may vary, the idea of combining several desired services and resources in one location remains consistent. According to a study done by Brigham Young University, the best information commons had many, if not all of the following:

- Reference and student workstations
- Collaborative learning rooms and areas
- Electronic classrooms
- Multimedia workstations
- Consultation stations
- Lounge area

 (Whitchurch, 2006 p. 264)

We would like to share with you how we, at the Department of Library Services of the University of Pretoria, teleported from boring to cool, by creating a Learning Centre as well as innovative products and services.

We started researching the concept in 2001. A task team scanned the literature, had interviews with students, lecturers, possible partners on campus as well as external experts. We soon realised that we have to take cognisance of the fact that most of our students belong to the Net generation who process and manage information differently, Having said that, it is also important to realise that lack of access to advanced instructional resources on the web and not only age, can

exclude students from being part of the Net Generation. It is also a mistake to assume that the interaction with digital toys makes the net generation information literate.

Creating a Learning Centre, as we decided to call it, entails changes on many levels:

- New mindset/paradigm
- New vision
- New partnerships
- New roles, new skills and new job descriptions
- New policies
- New physical space and furniture
- New products and services

A new mindset is necessary. Management and staff need to be open to changes and be prepared to be untraditional.

Our vision was to integrate the "learning place" and "learning space", creating an information rich environment by integrating information resources, technology and expertise in a physical and virtual space that enhances collaborative learning

It was necessary to negotiate new interfaces with our faculty libraries, to set flexible boundaries and strengthen relationships with inter alia the libraries' IT department and the Department of Education Innovation.

Traditionally all information specialists were situated in our faculty libraries. One of the first changes was to redeploy information specialists to the learning centre. Their job descriptions were expanded to include IT skills, knowledge of the universities' learning management system, marketing skills and product

development. Information literacy training became one of their major responsibilities. Information specialists working in the Learning centre need to be generalists, have a sound knowledge of what is happening in the faculty libraries, need presentation skills, have to be passionate about empowering students and client service. And they have to have vast amounts of patience. They need to be super-duper, gorgeous librarians.

The physical environment plays a very important role in a Learning Centre. A report by the American Library Association states that "Although where information resides matters less to the user, the library as place – the physical entity – remains more important than ever and performs a host of functions vital to learning and research. … Library facilities are being reconfigured to provide space for collaborative learning and research. Library space is now seen as learning space on an equal footing with classrooms and laboratories"
Collections and Access for the 21st-Century Scholar: Changing roles of research libraries website at http://www.arl.org.

A unique opportunity arose when the Law Library moved to a new faculty building. It provided us with the opportunity to redesign the additional physical space and because of financial restrictions; this was done in two phases.

 In our Learning Centre we included
- A huge number of computer work stations
- General inquiry/Reference desks
- Different learning spaces e.g for individual study or group discussions
- Wireless technology (printing included)
- Printing and scanning facilities which we outsourced to an outside company
- Training venue
- Facilities to watch videos and DVD's

- Facilities for students with special needs
- A dedicated telephone line to the Student IT Help Desk of the university to solve problems with passwords quickly

We differentiated between work stations, for example:

- There are dedicated email facilities in the foyer of the library
- carousels where you cannot sit or print, to make provision for quick searches on the catalogue
- individual booths with computers
- computer workstations with enough space to accommodate more than one student
- a cyberspace/internet cafe

One of the necessary mind shifts was to come to terms with the fact that the Learning Centre was no longer a traditional quiet library. Collaborative learning implies discussion and it does provide a vibrant buzz. The popularity of the space proofs that some students prefer a "noisier" environment. By restricting group discussions to one area of the library, we managed to cater for different preferences and it actually reduced noise levels in other areas of the library. Because we did the physical changes in two stages, we could experiment how to manage the noise levels by changing the layout of the floor.

We introduced several new services. For instance, the Reference service includes a digital service via Questionpoint and Skype and podcast tutorials and Library 2.0 tools are available via out library website.

In our discussions with students during the investigation stage, we realised that it was necessary to change our image. That included our marketing material, our manuals and the way we presented information literacy training.

Our first breakthrough came when we negotiated a permanent slot during the official orientation week for first year students. We regard this as a marketing opportunity par excellence. The challenge is to grab their attention and convince them that the library is "the place to be".

Since the establishment of the Learning Centre we had several innovative marketing campaigns. Our first marketing campaign consisted of a DVD where champions of the library highlighted the value of the library. A rap song was specifically composed for the library and combining rappers with library stacks, helped to change the image of the library from a boring, dusty place to "the place to be".

We aligned our posters, brochures as well as information literacy presentations to the branding of the DVD. We used sms language where possible, to grab the attention of our target market. To be even more relevant to their world, we used the theme of a very popular movie at the time, the Matrix. Formal feedback from the students, as well as the increased attendance of information literacy training sessions, proved that we were on the right track.

Our next innovative endeavour was an Industrial theatre. A creative lecturer from the Department of Marketing and Communication was the script writer and producer. Acting was added to the skills set of some of our library staff. It proved to be a lot of fun for actors and students alike and "teleported" team spirit to unknown heights.

As 2008 is the centenary of the University of Pretoria, we decided to launch another marketing campaign to celebrate the event. We used the feedback from the students, past experience and new learning technologies. ("To interface successfully with the Net generation, librarians must adopt and become adept at key learning technologies themselves; in other words, educational facilitators must keep apace technologically with their students" (Shih, 2006, p. 90)

As a DVD was proved to be very effective we created a new one, using a tour through the libraries of the University as the theme. The handout/manual this time round, was a Passport, containing all basic information students might need to help themselves in the library. The use of shotcodes, off-line web links, "teleported" the library into new worlds.

One of the innovative avatars/ information specialists in the Learning Centre, used an authoring game engine as an information literacy training and assessment tool.

Gartner predicts an 80% likelihood, that the majority of corporate e-learning projects will include games by 2011. (Clark, 2008) Gaming also fits the digitally rich world, preferred by the Net generation who are often "under whelmed" instead of overwhelmed, by traditional learning. (Prensky, 2006)
"Motivation is the most important factor that drives learning. When motivation dies, learning dies and playing stops. Good games are highly motivating to a great many people, we can learn from them how motivation is created and sustained." (Gee 2003, p.3).

Several educational principles are imbedded in gaming. Because students are not passive recipients of information but active agents, learning takes place more readily and students are empowered. (Clark, 2008)

This authoring engine was chosen because it can be used without the help of programmers or graphic designers and you can choose different worlds, players and avatars. Gamers can play as Guest Users. Task instructions are outlined at the beginning of the task and learning goals can be indicated. An avatar takes the student through a "world" of your choice, meeting as many other avatars as you choose. The student can be teleported into different spaces and text, tasks, video clips and audio can be incorporated. Assessment can be done inside the

game. The player answers the questions on his "PDA". Revision can also be done and a report can be sent to the trainer.

We learned a lot of lessons along the way:

- Never think that "you have arrived", adapting to new technologies and ever expanding needs of the students, is an ongoing process
- Think "out of the box"
- Work within your reality, there is no size that fits all
- Meet your clients where they are
- Change on all levels
- Don't neglect internal marketing – you have to take the whole organisation with you
- Manage interfaces with other units in the library as well as relevant departments on campus
- Have fun

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