

Library: An Interactive and Engaging Learning Space

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Abstract

A library is not only a place for maintaining a storehouse of books on multiple disciplines or a quiet getaway transporting one to a world of mysteries, or the author's paradise; it is also a space for the creation of enlightened discussion of ideas with historians, playwrights, film makers and poets. The purpose of this paper is to redefine the role of libraries as creative, inclusive and interactive spaces through the incorporation of library-led programmes and activities, which will pave the way for active learner engagement and innovative pedagogical practices. Instead of existing in isolation, libraries/ librarians need to collaborate with the faculties from different departments so that these programmes have a wider reach. Through such programmes, libraries can provide a transformative experience to the learners by making a departure from being a place of knowledge dissemination into an interactive, engaging and enlightening space for knowledge construction, skill generation and innovation.

Keywords: library-led programmes, transformative experience, interactive space, knowledge construction, skill generation and innovation.

Sixteen-year-old Yajas and his friends love to spend time in the school library, and often engage in stimulating discussions with the librarian. The library has become a space wherein they get unconditional acceptance from their teacher and also a platform to showcase their creative compositions through activities such as The Spoken Word. This lively bunch of students contribute poems to their school magazine,

wherein the creative skills of students is recognized, and they help with the editing of the school publications as well.

The above anecdote is based upon my personal observation of Shiv Nadar School, Noida in Delhi NCR, which I visited for the purpose of my research work. From my conversation with the students, I discovered that the library for them is not just a physical space, but one which energizes, engages and enlightens young minds by valuing their efforts, skills and contributions. This sentiment echoes that of Eric Klinenberg who views libraries as spaces which are highly popular among adolescents who want to spend time with other people their age and the library staff members guide them. "Libraries are the kinds of place where people with different backgrounds, passion and interests can take part in a living democratic culture...where the public, private and philanthropic sectors can work together to reach for something higher than the bottom line" (Klinenberg, 2018 b).

The purpose of my paper is to explore the role of libraries as incubation centres. Sinclair discusses libraries as "the shared spaces on each of our campuses that are ripe for transformation into incubators for digital scholarship." (Sinclair, 2014). This approach could pave the way for multiple pedagogical innovations, collaborative research projects, interactive discussions, all of which render this space with a new fervour.

The accessibility of the library is largely dependent on its utility in addition to the skill and personality of the person who is in charge of it, that is, the librarian. As a teacher educator, I am always perplexed by the lack of motivation on the part of my students to visit the university library. They always have many excuses for not visiting it like lack of relevant books, pages being missing, the unfriendly attitude of the librarian or simply their diffidence towards this space. Their zest to read is also extinguished by the easy availability of online curricular materials, which is adequate to write assignments and exams. It however makes one question if the purpose of reading or libraries is only to pass exams and not to enhance one's cognitive or thinking skills.

We, teachers, often complain about the lack of reading habits among learners, but we also need to ask if we are engaging with our learners constructively and kindling their creative spirits. The faculty members and the librarian of an educational institute perhaps need to collaborate in order to create vibrant spaces, and to organize activities for learners

taking into consideration their interests, needs and abilities. By facilitating library-led activities, libraries can emerge as interactive and inclusive spaces catering to diverse skill sets of learners. Before elaborating upon the intervention strategies and measures which can be undertaken within the university for active student engagement, it is not only important for us to look at the institutions which have initiated such library-led programmes on their campuses, but also gauge the effectiveness of such programmes. I have attempted to do this by interaction with librarians, and teacher educators, and also by analysing international library programmes.

Library-led Programmes

The Student Engagement Program at the University of Michigan Library provides and supports transformative student experiences, enabling practical opportunities for students to explore, experiment, create, lead, and reflect upon capacities and skills that are critical to addressing twenty-first century problems. The undergraduate and graduate students are selected through a rigorous process and enrol under various capacities—such as Student Engagement Ambassadors, Engagement Fellows and Mini Grants, for which they receive scholarships and funding. They perceive the library as a place which stimulates creativity, growth, constructive engagement and fosters self-efficacy. The Student Library Engagement Programme at the University of Michigan strives to engage with the community at large and attempts to take learning beyond the classrooms. Stuart Crouch (2016), Head of Senior School Libraries at the International School of Düsseldorf, Germany discusses the importance of building inquiry-led learning by involving the student community in the selection of books, library resources and through meaningful collaboration with the faculty and teachers. This collaboration emphasizes team teaching, lesson planning and shared responsibility of student outcomes and calls on the teachers and the librarians to share the classroom, library resources and their collective expertise.

For my study, I have focused on the library of one of the progressive schools, Shiv Nadar School, Noida (Delhi NCR). The school library organizes a series of innovative activities for its learners taking into cognizance their needs, interests and aptitudes. Some of these activities have been proposed by the students themselves such as the Spoken

Word, which provides a platform for students to showcase their creative compositions. It helps to discover two kinds of writers—first, who write to express their creativity, and the second, for whom writing is a form of catharsis. For the latter category, the librarian organized interactions with the counselling team to allay their troubled and anxious feelings. The Spoken Word activity provides a non-competitive and non-judgemental space wherein the students get an opportunity to read their compositions. The librarian, by organizing these events, has redefined her role from an “in-charge of books” to an innovative pedagogue who taps the potential of learners to ensure greater participation. She keeps a keen eye on the books issued by the students and has discussions with them to gauge their interests about the activities they want to be organized. She also arranges author meets within the library space so that the avid readers and budding young writers can satiate their curiosity about the art and craft of storytelling and writing. Students interested in art get a chance to contribute by designing and illustrating the school magazine and other in-house publications. Doodle Fests are organized for such students, where they exhibit their cartoons, designs, calligraphy and illustrations. Through collaboration with institutions such as the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, the students are sent to attend training programmes and sessions on curating exhibitions that help them chisel their organizational skills. The school organizes a wide variety of events/exhibitions that hones the research and cognitive skills of students; for example, the Anne Frank exhibition held in 2017 (Shiv Nadar School website) paved the way for discussion about the Holocaust and its comparison with the current socio-political context of communal tensions and treatment of Kashmiris. What one infers from these activities is that learning does not necessarily take place within the four walls of the classrooms. Such activities pave the way for experiential based learning, where subjects like History and Art are connected, and past events are linked with contemporary situations. The task of the librarian does not merely stop with the organization of such activities, it also extends to the digital preservation of the students’ compositions. The merit of these programmes also lies in the engagement of a large number of learners who are not necessarily bibliognosts, for they contribute in other ways like doing photographic coverage of important events organized in the school campus for publication in the school magazine. Others share their travel experiences by contributing photos

and pictures in the travelogue, and some use their design or graphic skills for library documentation work. The library website is a vibrant virtual space where students not only showcase their writings and designs, but also suggest book and movie recommendations. Thus, through active student participation, the library has something to offer to everybody. The role of the librarian as an innovative pedagogue is to be acknowledged, whereby the creative potential of the individual learners gets space to flourish.

To encourage librarians to be innovative, various programmes are available. In the National Institute of Rural Development in Hyderabad, the library has a Centre on Rural Documentation (CORD), which organizes community development programmes by inviting library professionals from all over India and orienting them towards skill development. Also, the library in the Institute for Social and Economic Change under MHRD and the State Government at Bengaluru organizes author workshops wherein students and faculty members from other institutions are also invited. Such programmes are a great success as there is a huge student and faculty participation.

The success of the library-led programmes is largely dependent on the passion, creative partnership, and the collaborative learning experience between the teacher/librarian and learner. In the following section, I have attempted to suggest some more activities which can be integrated within the library spaces to enhance the knowledge as well as the skills of the stakeholders—the teaching- learning community.

Libraries as Interventionist and Creative Spaces: Suggested Activities

Libraries have the potential to become centres for collaborative and interdisciplinary inquiry by creating spaces which can facilitate knowledge creation. Libraries can organize programmes to encourage reading, and can have reading challenges for both the faculty members and students. Voracious readers, who have read/issued the maximum number of books in a week/month could be rewarded, issued certificates or their names be displayed on the library honour board. A mechanism can be devised to check the authenticity of reading claims. Readers can further be encouraged to write book reviews on the library blog and to moderate discussions on the books. To facilitate reading, initiatives such as Read at Work can be organized. Singapore in 2016 launched Read@

Work to inculcate and strengthen a reading culture at the workplace and more than 60 organizations joined in (Singapore Government Agency Website, 2016). Surely, reading as an activity becomes interesting, easier and rewarding as well when encouraged in an educational institute; and the librarian can suggest new books/authors to faculty members and students.

Book Club activities focusing on a variety of themes could be arranged by different departments. Members can be encouraged to actively contribute by sharing a quote, personal write up or excerpt on the specified theme. Library book reading or film screening should try and encourage ideas of inclusion and diversity. It can be a useful platform to introduce books and films around themes of gender, sexuality, queer identity, nationalism and dissent.

Creative forums can be organized through activities such as Spoken Word and exhibitions which showcase students' publications. Spoken Word activities give students an opportunity to showcase their creative compositions in various genres such as poetry, short films and photography archives. Students should be encouraged to write for in-house publications like the school magazine, and can be further involved in editing and designing process of the same. Apart from the traditional print media, creativity in the library can also be celebrated through the creation of Library Blogs. This would serve as a participative and interactive space wherein students can post their poems, short stories, travelogues, book reviews or even exhibit their photography skills. It could additionally have a section on the librarian's picks and notification informing about upcoming activities, programmes, author interactions, writing/poetry contests in the school and other parts of the city.

Organizing workshops is another way in which the library can facilitate a deeper engagement with the skills that a student is interested in. Inviting professional story tellers from organizations such as Kathalaya, who not only specialize in the art of storytelling, but also on skills such as narration, voice modulation and use of props can be rewarding. It can be a cathartic experience for the participants to express their emotions under the camouflage of the storyline and its characters. Additionally, the library can establish specialized centres such as digital pedagogy to foster the skills of students and faculty members. Projects such as digital storytelling would encourage the use of digital tools, enabling the conversion of a written narrative into a multimedia project. The

students would learn various stages of creating a digital story like writing and scripting, storyboarding and planning, and digital effects. A complicated reading material/concept can be simplified and made interesting through the creation of digital storytelling.

An educational institution can further provide creative space for Writer/Artist in Residence programmes, whereby the writer/artist can conduct a month-long workshop for the students. The writers can share the art of creating stories, developing characters and devising plots, and to deal with a range of genres from romance to horror to adventure. Likewise, artists can train the participants in art work—be it on the canvas or the creation of graphic novels, or cartoons. The therapeutic value of these programmes cannot be undermined. Klinenberg (2018 a) through his research study has analysed the feelings of his respondents who envisage libraries as therapeutic spaces enabling them to cope with feelings of isolation, loneliness and alienation, making them feel liberated, responsible, intelligent and thoughtful. Apart from writers, constructive interactions with filmmakers, dramatists and entrepreneurs can enable the learners to have an understanding about the technical/practical/real-life aspects and challenges of various professions. Also, workshops can be organized on skill development and employability by inviting the best practitioners/recruiters from various fields like journalism, film, acting, management and academia. This can be particularly useful as knowledge dissemination is incomplete without skill generation.

Short-term certificate courses for students and faculty can be arranged in the library space as well. Student-centric courses and faculty development programmes can be introduced which can lead to their upgradation of skills such as courses on digital pedagogy, research and academic paper writing, etc. The library team can also collaborate with the departments and specialized organizations and institutions for offering such courses and programmes. For example, Shiv Nadar School Noida Library in collaboration with Ctrl Alt Cinema, offers digital platform and cinema-based courses. These courses aim to foster specific skills such as research, writing, visual literacy, creativity, problem solving and critical thinking. The interactive sessions with prominent artists and top professionals would equip the students to learn the art and craft of filmmaking through their creative and constructive engagement.

Libraries must have an appealing physical ambience. The physical

ambience also influences our psychological mindscape. Libraries must focus on aesthetics, motivating the learners to frequent the space. They must have comfortable seating spaces, lounge chairs, sofas wherein the readers can pursue their creative interests, have their intimate moments with the books and are transported into a utopian paradise. Creative corners with accessible and learner-friendly digital tools must be set up for budding poets, writers, storytellers and scholars. These tools can be used for making pedagogical innovations and creation of multiple resources for those learners who lack linguistic proficiency. For instance, the learners who are proficient in language use, can use their skills for simplifying, modifying and translating the texts and materials, creating a huge multilingual resource for learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This can also be translated into a library research project for promoting inclusivity in language learning.

Thus, from the above set of recommendations we envisage the transformative role of libraries as inclusive and interactive spaces brimming with meaningful, constructive and engaging activities for the teaching-learning community as a whole. By offering a plethora of creative opportunities, the library creates a space for everyone and makes a departure from being a storehouse of books or a place of knowledge dissemination into an engrossing and engaging space for knowledge construction, skill generation and innovation.

Conclusion

The university/college libraries of the future will not only emerge as repositories of books, but also act as gateways to information and education and open up an exciting world of opportunity for its stakeholders. Their transformative power would lie in being more outwardly community focused, inclusive and more innovative in their design and programme development. In addition to all this, they would succeed in providing multiple spaces to the teaching-learning community wherein they can come to practise hands-on skills.

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