Creating a new Social Science Library at Oxford University based on reader consultation

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A little history

The new Social Science Library opened in October 2004 and, together with the adjacent Law Library, forms the hub of library provision for the social sciences in Oxford University Library Services. It was created by bringing together the collections, services and staff from the libraries for economics; politics & international relations; social policy & social work; criminology; and socio-legal studies, in to a new building designed by Sir Norman Foster and Partners. During our first year of opening, social science legal deposit materials from the Bodleian Library were transferred; the International Development Library then moved in the following summer; and expansion continues with the integration of social science materials for Russian and East European studies.

I started my post as Social Science Deputy Librarian in 2000, four years before the new library opened. This provided a good timeframe in which to plan the integration, for example it gave sufficient time to standardise workflows, embed common practice and create a unified staff manual prior to the move. Since its opening, the library has been cited as a notable success within the university, and this article outlines the planning and reader consultation behind its design, and reviews what we should have done differently.

Research collections

The new library would need to support the research needs of at least five departments and over twenty research centres; we therefore needed to collect evidence and consult with faculty to inform our decisions and collection development policies. A series of focus group sessions were held with academics to establish their information needs and working habits. Some profiling on participants in advance of setting up the sessions ensured a representative mix of faculty. Discussion in these focus groups was not 'opinion polling' on how a library and information service should be run, but instead focused on how researchers discover and access information, and the role of different publications and formats within their discipline. These sessions provided some very useful and insightful qualitative information.

Following on from the focus groups, we conducted a web-based survey of information needs and uses to gather quantitative evidence for the collection decisions we would need to make, e.g. what extent of journal backruns should be kept on our open-shelves; to what extent should we collect materials in foreign languages.

Lastly, drilling down from this, the research interests of individuals and research centres were profiled. As well as informing purchasing decisions, stated research interests were translated in to Library of Congress subject headings and these were run against our catalogue to help determine which materials should be pulled from Bodleian closed stacks to our open shelves in support of current, front-line research activities[1].

Teaching collections

Where I wish we had undertaken more reader consultation is with regard to the physical arrangement of the teaching collections. As the new library was replacing the functions provided by both departmental lending libraries and reference-only reading rooms, it was clear that we should adopt a model of providing at least one reference copy of each reading list text, plus multiple lending copies in relation to student numbers (usually one copy for every ten students taking the course, topped up by provision in the college libraries). So far, so good; but we made the decision to have just one book sequence, shelving reference, short loan and normal loan texts together for teaching and research, deciding that the library was not sufficiently big to warrant separate units (175,000 books). This was probably a mistake. Finding texts in high demand now causes real problems for students, and it is clear that they would have preferred a separate reserve room with a core course collection. We have responded by: numbering all desks and implementing a slip system for items in use; creating a staff-mediated collection of several hundred core textbooks behind the issue desk; prioritising shelving activities; undertaking termly stock-checks; closely monitoring check-out figures and reservation reports etc., but more reader consultation could have avoided this problem.

Reclassification

Each feeder library had its own, local classification scheme, but research and teaching within the social sciences is interdisciplinary and we needed to interfile the different collections in to one integrated sequence. We chose the Library of Congress classification scheme, enabling cost-effective classification according to a globally-recognised scheme favoured by large research and university libraries, with a bias towards the social sciences.

Our main challenge was to ensure that readers could meaningfully browse the reclassified collections by subject, whilst completing the reclassification project within a tight budget and time constraint. Key sections of the local classification schemes were therefore mapped across to the new scheme based on the main departmental teaching and research interests, with the reclassifiers querying items that fell outside this mapping. Parts of the collections particularly vulnerable to being dispersed under the new classification scheme were also identified and ring-fenced for the site-librarians/subject specialists to reclassify. New documentation, e.g. detailed subject-conversion guides that relate old to new classmarks, were created and reclassification parties held for faculty.

General consultation

To inform our planning for new services and the physical space, we looked at the results of library surveys and raised questions at the social science undergraduate and postgraduate joint consultative committees. Feedback was also solicited via our website, which was redesigned, and through poster campaigns, emails, library comments books, leaflets, etc. We also displayed the plans for the new library throughout the different site libraries and invited comments. Unsurprisingly, opening hours was the main concern, and so we open for seven days a week during term and six days a week during vacation. Patterns of use are closely monitored (through the swipe card entrance gate, circulation statistics, and reader counts), and after the first year of opening it was clear that we needed to adjust and extend our weekend opening hours to be later in the day.

Other factors that came out of the general reader consultation included a concern about queues. The key has been to streamline our workflows, e.g. we don't date-stamp any books; instead students receive an email the day before anything is due back, and, just as importantly, to have flexible staff, e.g. our shelvers carry pagers and are called to the desk when it is busy to help out.

Study environments

Study environments were a central consideration of the design for the new library. We have 400 study spaces including: two group discussion rooms; three graduate workrooms; an IT training room; 10 individual study carrels; and a range of open-plan and partitioned seating. To encourage learning and teaching activities to take place in the library, a room booking system for our discussion and IT training rooms was implemented and promoted to faculty. This resulted in 250 bookings in our first year. There are obvious political benefits in having departmental meetings, seminars and tutorials taking place in the library as it brings in academics and researchers who might otherwise not have passed through our doors. To get to the discussion rooms they have to pass our new research book display, our current journal display, our helpful staff, and so on.

The rooms were also booked by students for a range of study groups and revision sessions. Student surveys have shown that a sense of community is particularly important for graduates, and the discussion rooms and graduate workrooms have played an important role in retaining a sense of community in a large, multi-disciplinary space.

General layout of the library

We tried to design a library with an intuitive layout. Readers often don't have the time or inclination to read leaflets or attend training sessions. The issue desk is at the entrance so anyone entering the library can see where the staff are located. A staff point is available before you swipe into the library for immediate help and to meet and greet with a smile. Reader computers can be seen from the entrance area. Signposting is minimal but effective.

Help desk versus issue desk

It was clear, looking at reader enquiries and talking with colleagues, that it is a more effective use of staff resources, and easier for the readers, to have just one desk for all transactions and enquiries. The key to making this work is the location of staff offices. Behind the issue desk is the office for the reader services librarian, meaning she is close by for questions and can maintain her awareness of what is going on. Then, around the corner from the issue desk and in the centre of the library, are the offices for the subject consultants. This means that readers can be easily referred on by issue desk staff for research and subject enquiries. In the event that no one is available to provide detailed help on the spot (e.g. during weekends), readers are invited to book a research appointment.

Shelving

The speed (and accuracy) of shelving work is a core service for most libraries, and it was imperative that we built a re-shelving area in to the design of the library (not something in the forefront of architects' minds). Our aim was to minimise the number of times each book was handled, and to have just one place to look if a book was not on the shelf. A large block of shelving trolleys, each one of which is dedicated to a particular range of shelfmarks, is therefore located adjacent to the issue desk. Issue desk staff decant returned books on to the appropriate trolley, ready for it to be wheeled away by the shelvers. Despite this we did experience significant shelving back-logs during the first year and received reader complaints. We reacted by implementing a service standard, introducing a chart to record which trolleys were last shelved when, and instigating closer management and the involvement of more staff. The weekly shelving of some 7,000 items is now under control.

Computing and reprographics

The library provides 50 computers for readers, all of which are networked to a printer in the photocopy room. Photocopying and printing costs 5p per page and readers pay using the Oxford University common photocopy card. Readers can use our computers for all scholarly purposes: word processing; email; not just 'library' activities. We have a designated no-laptop zone along the south side of the library for quiet study. In the photocopy room we provide staplers, guillotines, hole punchers, etc. and also a free binding machine which is very popular with students. The library was built without wireless; almost all our desks have ethernet and power points which give a fast network connection. However, reader demand for wireless is increasing, and so wireless is scheduled for the next academic year.

Post-opening consultation

Towards the end of our first year of opening we held a reader survey to help gauge reaction to the new library and inform planning for the next academic year. We received 655 responses (33% of our core membership) and satisfaction levels were very encouraging. Actions taken in response to this survey included selling stationery from the issue desk and providing a fifth, more advanced photocopier. We have also received some 400 comments in the Library comments book (which I enjoy replying to), and the website received over 70,000 visits in the first year. Reader consultation work continues…

Reference

1 If you are interested in the methodology of this, or in the results, an article was published in *The new review of information and library research*, 2003, written by Mark Janes and Margaret Robb.