
tlc@bedford: the library social learning space at Royal Holloway University of London (RHUL)



John Tuck
*Director of Library Services,
Royal Holloway University of
London*
Tel: 01784 443330
E-mail: john.tuck@rhul.ac.uk

The Royal Holloway University of London library is on three sites, all within close walking distance of each other: there are the Founder's Library, situated in the magnificent Founder's building, designed by W.H. Crossland, inspired by the Château of Chambord and opened by Queen Victoria in 1886; the more functional three-storey Bedford Library, opened in 1993; and the Music Library, located in Wetton's Terrace on the other side of the A30.

In total, the library has some 600,000 volumes of bookstock and 460 metres of archives; it subscribes to approximately 17,000 electronic journals and serials, lends nearly 800,000 items per annum and has an annual footfall in excess of 700,000, all served by 45.5 FTE (Full-Time Equivalent) staff.

TLC@BEDFORD

In his internal Royal Holloway report of January 2008, Les Watson, interim director of information services, identified as his first recommendation:

‘A pilot development of a new 21st century social learning “learning café” style space ... undertaken ... with the aim of completion for the start of the autumn term [2008/09] ... Likely costs for such a development are £800k to £1.8k ... Likely timescales are 8 months to 18 months.’¹

This recommendation had emerged partially from desk research but predominantly from a review based on 45 meetings with individuals and with groups of students and staff of RHUL. A key

theme emerging from the review was the widely acknowledged lack of a social learning space and of a will to develop such a space.

The consultation included the setting up of a Facebook group called 'Love your library'. Students were invited to join and to comment on their likes and dislikes in relation to the existing library space. This generated significant interest and had an impact on the planning process, leading for instance to a scaling down of the original plan for a café element. The Facebook site (www.rhul.ac.uk/loveyourlibrary) remains operational.

The consultation led to the identification of the Bedford Library as the best location for the new space, due to its combination of extended opening hours, availability of staff support and learning resources – both online and in paper – and its popularity at the heart of the campus.

In a separate internal document, Les Watson proposed:

'that circa 150 additional seats will be created. The space will have wired and wireless networking, provision of some catering facilities, and a range of seating to accommodate different group configurations. The space will make use of colour and graphics to express a theme which is being developed by the appointed designers in consultation with the University. The space will also provide access to power and network facilities to enable users to bring and use their own laptops and other devices. The aim is to develop a high quality space that provides facilities for conversational and group learning that is of high quality. The Library will remain open during the development of the space and the aim is to complete the project for the start of the Autumn term [2008/09], but it is acknowledged that this is a very tight timescale'.²

WHAT IS A SOCIAL LEARNING SPACE?

Much has been written on social learning spaces but there is no catch-all definition of the term. However, a basic premise is neatly summarised by John Seely Brown: 'all learning starts with conversation'.³

Other ingredients have been defined by Geoffrey T. Freeman:

'As an extension of the classroom, library space needs to embody new pedagogies, including collaborative and interactive modalities. Significantly,

the library must serve as the principal building on campus where one can truly experience and benefit from the centrality of an institution's intellectual community.

In this interactive learning environment, it is important to accommodate the sound of learning – lively group discussions or intense conversations over coffee – while controlling the impact of acoustics on surrounding space.⁴

To be effective, social learning spaces must reflect the changing behaviours of their users, in this case the students and researchers of RHUL. They are no different from the three students – from King's College London, Sussex University and Cambridge University – whose case studies were provided in the December 2008 Guardian supplement on 'the digital student'. As they said, each has a lot of IT equipment:

'I have a phone, a laptop, a USB stick, a portable hard drive and a video camera for presentations and the like.'

'I have a mobile, a laptop, an iPod, and a digital camera. I use my laptop to read journal articles, to check emails, to collect data, and to check what I need to prepare for my classes.'

'I have a mobile, a desktop at home, a small laptop for taking notes, and an iPod to listen to in the library.'⁵

SO WHAT HAVE WE GOT AT RHUL?

We have tlc@bedford, a deliberately ambiguous name chosen by the library staff ('tender loving care', 'The Learning Centre', etc., etc.), which is the result of a complete makeover of level 2 of the Bedford Library.

Thanks to the combined efforts of designers Nomad (www.nomad-rdc.com) and interior fit-out and refurbishment contractors Vivid Interiors (www.vividinteriors.com), under the leadership of the interim director of information services, Les Watson (www.leswatson.com) and with the support and efforts of RHUL's library, IT and facilities management staff over a hectic summer, Royal Holloway (www.rhul.ac.uk) now has an exciting, innovative and flexible library space for learning.

Project-managed by Ridge (www.ridge.co.uk), the space provides books, digital resources, IT facilities and group study areas in a fresh, contemporary environment. The space has more than

200 seats organised to provide a variety of study areas, 45 thin client pc workstations, a refreshment area, equipment loan facilities, self-service book borrowing, the short loan collection and photocopying, printing and binding services. A one-stop-shop point has been included, at which students can receive assistance with their information and IT needs.



To quote – slightly out of context – Laura Swaffield’s reference to BBC TV’s *Politics Show South* (26 October 2008): ‘You no longer have to worry about stern-faced librarians with severe haircuts shushing you if you speak above a whisper.’⁶ ‘Shush’ has moved seamlessly to ‘sushi’, as noise, mobile phones, eating and drinking are permitted. Just look at the librarians and the students who feature in the busy space in the ‘Welcome’ video film made by ‘Here Comes the Boss’ (www.herecomestheboss.com), just a few weeks after opening.⁷

tlc@bedford (www.rhul.ac.uk/information-services/tlc) complements the more traditional and silent study space provided on levels 1 and 3 of the Bedford Library and in Founder’s Library and the Music Library. Its focus is on facilitating group and project work. It provides a range of group-study environments, from open plan to private, enabling small and large groups to work together. It encourages team working, presentation practice, problem solving and brainstorming, all possible over a coffee and some edamame beans.

A Japanese theme has been adopted as part of the catering offering. This links to the ‘Japanese Tea House’ which forms the centrepiece of the design and can be described as a semi-private and multi-purpose structure (along the same lines as the ‘igloos’ at the Saltire Centre (www.saltire.co.uk)). The Tea House has a specific Royal Holloway association. It was inspired by the atmosphere of peace and tranquillity of the Royal Holloway campus, coupled with an early idea of

Les Watson and the designers to focus the learning space around the house of the architect of the nineteenth-century Founder’s building. This early candidate (later rejected) for the location of the social learning space is a wooden structure that houses student services, next to the college shop.

The tlc@bedford project budget was set at £1m but this sum needed to be increased, rising to a total cost of approximately £1.5 million by the end of the project. The decision was made to proceed with the project in February 2008 and the deadline for completion and handover to the college (that is, Royal Holloway) was Monday 22 September, the first day of the 2008/09 session. Partial handover was achieved by the deadline and the library, which had remained open and operational throughout the summer, was able, on that day, to open its new and bright glass-fronted doors to students – who immediately set about use of the space, its facilities and services. Full handover and full operation were achieved on 13 October 2008.

So WHAT’S NEW?

The space is new and it is modern. But Royal Holloway libraries are no strangers to innovation. The December 1908 issue of the *Bedford College magazine* [Royal Holloway grew out of the Victorian colleges Bedford College and Royal Holloway College] reported the following development:

‘Beyond the Science Library ... is the new “Modern Languages Library” ... Here too is the latest and largest addition to the College treasures – the tiger shot and presented by Mrs. Mayne. Its open countenance and cheerful smile offer a friendly greeting to readers, and may possibly account for the crowded condition of the Modern Languages Library.’⁸

The tiger has long gone. Today coi carp and friendly turtles provide the welcome, swimming and darting away as students step through the interactive pond at the front entrance.



To introduce a personal note, I write this after a quick walk round the floor on a Thursday afternoon in the penultimate week of the autumn term 2008/09, eight weeks after the space became fully operational. On my tour, I counted some 140 students working away, many of them in groups, some in very close proximity, literally leaning over each other and comfortable in each other's presence, some of them using the self-service issue and return kiosks, a dozen grouped on the pinch stools in the Tea House, three or four in line for coffee, others using photocopiers, printers, looking for books or working in isolation in some of the occasional seats, of various designs, arranged adjacent to staff offices. There was a real buzz about the space.

WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK?

As one biomedical sciences student has stated, 'It's good that you can get food here, especially during the 24-hour exam period. Also, it is now more social in the library, which is good. It looks great – definitely a big improvement.'⁹

A computer sciences student is happy too: 'The design is great as there are areas where groups can actually study. The quiet areas are well placed. I think it's great that the College has invested in the library, while the café is also a good investment.'¹⁰

There needs to be realism, however. The new space has not addressed all concerns about the library, its resources and services. In an article called 'Bedford renovation – would you like some sushi with that?', Michael Laing is mystified by 'an interactive pond in the library'; 'semi-transparent curtains to mark boundaries on the Wagamama style tables'; and 'security scanners in the middle of the entrance doors'.¹¹

But the RHUL library staff like very much the image of the student at the end of the 'Welcome to the library' film who quite simply, straightforwardly – and without duress – says 'We love the library.'¹²

OVERALL CONTEXT

These changes have not taken place in isolation at Royal Holloway. They are part of a strategy of continuous improvement of library services at the college. As well as investment in physical space, there has been an increased injection of funding for reading-list materials and additional electronic resources, linked to the necessary protection to cover the higher than average annual inflation

costs of this type of material. Over the summer of 2008 other developments included a significant increase in numbers of reading lists made available online (now up to 560); more digitised past examination papers; and self-service library issue and return kiosks, increased from 5 to 8 and now available in both the Bedford and Founder's libraries.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Apart from ensuring that all the snags are dealt with and signed off, the immediate priorities are to define and document the lessons learnt from the project (and there are several in terms of project management) and to evaluate the new space, its services and use – in particular the ways in which it supports and facilitates methods of learning. Work is in progress to identify the criteria (quantitative and qualitative) to measure the success of the learning space.

REFERENCES

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- 10 Quoted *ibid.*, p 8
- 11 *The Founder* (10 November 2008), p 8
- 12 'Welcome to the Bedford Library' (2008); see www.rhul.ac.uk/information-services/tlc/video/