

Back Talk — Information Commons: The Wal-Martization of Libraries and Learning

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As regular readers of this column no doubt surmise, I write about whatever I am doing or thinking when **Katina** screams/gently asks where is **Backtalk**? If I have been to Singapore, I write about that, if I have been to Hangzhou, you hear about the libraries there. Of course if you look back at the topics of some of my columns you can wonder what sort of life I lead, e.g., “**Kafka Meets Tasini**” http://www.against-the-grain.com/backtalk13_4.html.

Up until a few months ago I thought I was set to cruise into retirement after having built a new “iconic” 21st century library that would enable the **University of Hong Kong** to enter its second century in style (if you are a millionaire and in search of a good cause, you can still make my dream come true). But then the fund raisers here noticed that since they could build at least four smaller buildings for the cost of a single “iconic” new main library, and raise much more money from four donors instead of one donor, the decision was to put the new library concept back on the shelf, no pun intended. So, instead of a new 450,000 square foot library, the University’s global campus planning consultant decreed that what we needed was a 10,000 square foot Information Commons. And anyway, THE FUTURE IS DIGITAL, RIGHT? Now of course I always preach digital so how could I object? Consequently, in the spirit of “if you can’t beat them, join them,” I decided that I should take a good look at the most successful implementations of this concept — so you are stuck reading about them.

I decided that I would begin by taking apart this two word phrase: Information Commons. Since librarians eat and drink information in paper and electronic varieties I didn’t worry about that but I was interested in why the word COMMONS was used. There are all sorts of commons: the people, the lower house of the British Parliament, and the piece of land found in quaint villages in New and Old England, etc. According to one dictionary the latter kind of commons is “a field covered with grass or herbage and suitable for grazing by livestock.”¹ I liked that definition as it caused me to envision a field with books growing up like thick shafts of grain with the readers out there chomping away. And perhaps the idea of an Information Commons is that it is a place where information abounds and all members of the community are free to come together to use it as a group . . . and yet, this communal vision comes to a fast blackout since there is nothing free about setting up an informational commons — but I suppose compared to the price of a new 450,000 square foot library the cost for new furniture, computers, software, new and newly cross-trained staff for an information commons is relatively cheap, if not almost free.

I, like most of our students, began my quest for information on information commons with

Google. I found lots of really good things to read, but I will only list two here and only comment on the first:

Brigham Young University, Harold B. Lee Library. Report of the Information Commons Project Team, 2003. http://www.lib.utah.edu/misc/bldg_com/docs/04_01_03info_commons_final.pdf

Lippincott, Joan K. Net Generation Students and Libraries. Educause Resource Center. <http://www.educause.edu/NetGenerationStudentsandLibraries/6067>

The first report by the librarians at **BYU** is particularly good for me because they are talking about transforming a portion of a library built as a library, into something new and because 20 years ago I spent 13 years of my now lost youth there. What is great about this report, even though it is now two years old, is that these librarians and representatives of their user community have really done their homework including conducting site visits to the major libraries most of the other articles I read mentioned.

The **BYU** staff noted that most information commons contained 8 elements:

1. Reference and student workstations.
2. Collaborative learning rooms.
3. Electronic classrooms.
4. Multimedia workstations.
5. Consultation stations
6. Writing lab
7. Extended hours
8. Lounge

After reviewing this list I thought, wait a minute, with the exception of a “writing lab,” my library already has all of this so why does the consultant insist that we need an Information Commons? While I believe this is still a good question, I think I know the answer: We have the parts but we lack the integration identified by the **BYU** team as the key to success. Here are some examples of what I mean:

- **Reference and student workstations.** They noted that you couldn’t just have workstations plus librarians and computer lab technicians but the most successful sites had cross trained staff equally capable of helping with reference information questions as well as being able to help students with the ins and outs of software problems. They also suggested that the reference desk be cut up to make it easier for students and librarians to work together — not across from each other. The workstations, moreover, need to be arranged in a way that integrates with today’s pedagogical emphasis on group learning — giving students room to talk

and work together. All of this takes space and they noted that many reference books had to be sent elsewhere to make room for the new furniture and services.


- **Collaborative learning rooms.** Most, if not all, university libraries today seem to have group study rooms replete with whiteboards, wireless connections, etc., but what I found interesting was the recommendation that “technical and reference support should be available” for the patrons in these areas — part of an integrated whole. In my own library’s case, we install security cameras in small group study rooms and cross our fingers in the hope that nothing bad will happen there.
- **Electronic classrooms.** The need for integration in this area was manifested by noting that very successful sites offered short courses not only in information management but also basic software technical skills. These rooms could also be used by teachers for other purposes and during exam and paper writing periods the computers were opened up for general student use, adding to the number of terminals available.
- **Multimedia workstations.** The emphasis seems to be on campus integration, that instead of having disparate facilities on campus doing this sort of thing, a successful Commons bring all the equipment and staff who know how to use them together with everything else happening in the Commons — this is a one-stop shop for integrating multimedia information, technology, hardware, and learning.
- **Consultation stations.** In this case one-on-one reference and technology consultation sessions are integrated within the Commons and not located outside it on another floor or area of the Library. These stations, moreover, are not seen just as the private property of library staff members but can also be used by teachers and TA’s as needed — the library is not separate from the rest of the university but an integrated part of it.
- **Writing lab.** This is clearly a case where non librarians are integrated within the physical space where students are accessing and manipulating information instead of taking their printout or sending their paper to a writing lab teacher for help.
- **Extended hours.** The principle of integration here is integrating what can happen in the Commons with the life cycle of students who tend to do their searching and writing in the late afternoon and night, instead of the morning and early afternoon when classes are being held.

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- **Lounge.** Students rest, eat, study, and play. The idea for lounges seems to be to integrate opportunities for resting, hanging out with friends, and studying within the Commons. Interestingly, there is no mention of food in the **BYU** report.

Wal-Mart is an example of integration. Everything you want is in one location. Instead of going from one shop to the next, each with its own culture and cash register, at **Wal-Mart** you have a single integrated culture and you pay once. My library is like a small town or even a mall with all the needed services but it has lost the integration that exists in much smaller libraries. I still hope to get a new library to house the 100,000 or so new books we add annually, but I also want an information commons and I want to spread the principles that govern it across the entire library system. 

Endnotes

1. The Free Dictionary by Farlex, "Common land" <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/common%20land>.