Assessment of Library Learning Terrace: Spring 2012

The Library Learning Terrace has been open on a regular schedule for nearly two complete quarters [fall and winter terms 2011-12][1]. The Terrace learning environment was designed to facilitate development of self-directed, intentional learners, through nearly total flexible furniture, occasional provision of focused assistance from librarians and tutors, and continuous presence of a security guard. Close to the end of its second term of operation, a two-part assessment of its use has been conducted. Data have been gathered through a short questionnaire sent to the 2,934 Drexel students who swiped their ID to enter the Library Learning Terrace between September 2011 and February 2012, and from counts of hourly occupancy of the facility taken by the entrance guards.

Insights.

Clearly students use the Learning Terrace heavily and for the most part as intended. Its flexible furniture, and particularly the movable whiteboards, is repositioned by students to create spaces conducive to their work. The environment is appreciated for its support of student engagement, group work, practice of communications with other students and reflecting about what they are learning. Satisfaction is moderately high, especially with its sense of safety, comfort, flexibility to create space, and atmosphere, but with clearly recognized shortcomings of its small size, crowdedness, noise, and inconsistently performing electric outlets and internet service. The experiment has been a success in introducing a different type of learning environment, but it also brings attention to the shortage of quiet areas for intentional learning. There are student advocates for building more such facilities on campus, while also those who wish to see more traditional library spaces that offer the variety of quiet and group study among more expert assistance.

Survey of users.

The questionnaire was available for anonymous response between March 9 and March 19, 2012. During these ten days 430 responses were recorded [15% response rate], with an 84.4% completion rate [363]. Nineteen multiple choice and two open-ended questions were posed. The questions were designed to seek student opinions on basic service satisfaction and also factors associated with the impact of environment on learning.[2] The quick study was conducted to capture some user reaction as an evaluation of the facility; the response rate, in spite of a reminder sent, is low but replies reflect the general distribution by discipline of students using the W.W. Hagerty Library. It is not surprising that the majority of responses came from first year students since mention of the Terrace was standard in new student orientation. Also an equal number [n= 132, 30.8%] of respondents noted they use the Terrace moderately or slightly often. Respondents represented all colleges or schools expect Law and Public Health; the majority was affiliated with Engineering [27%], Arts & Sciences [22.3%] and Business [20.4%]. A summary of responses, by questions posed is provided in Appendix A.

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[1] Although opened at the start of exams in June 2011, the Terrace was closed for several weeks during the summer term to complete punch-list repairs.

[2] Project Kaleidoscope [PKAL] Learning Spaces Collaboratory. An Emerging LSC Template for Assessing Learning Spaces. http://www.pkallsc.org/

Viewed as important to students, the Terrace was rated as very or extremely important to about a third [30%] of respondents, with another 38% rating it as moderately important. Similarly, the majority of respondents acknowledged hearing other people talking about the Terrace, with over 60% gauging the buzz to be moderately, very or extremely often. Students found the Terrace to be useful to varying degree in its support of specific factors identified to be indicators of intentional learning. The majority of respondents rated the Terrace as extremely or very useful to support active engagement with peers [63%] and practice communicating with other students [51%]. A clear majority rated the Terrace as moderately to extremely useful to practice thinking on topics in their major [59.9%] and to reflect on what they are learning [58.9%]. Similarly, a strong majority [82%] would extremely, very, or moderately strongly recommend the Library Learning Terrace. In contrast a high percentage of respondents [42.3%] found the Terrace not at all useful to communicate with experts helpful to their learning.
Several statements were posed and respondents were asked to indicate the strength of their agreement or disagreement with each. Clearly most respondents agreed or agreed strongly that the Terrace is safe [96.2%], is comfortable for learning [81.2%], flexible to create a space to do work [80.8%], accommodates working on the range of assignments [83.1%], is aesthetically pleasing [79.5%], and easily accommodates technologies essential to learning [70.7%]. The statement that the Terrace encourages serendipitous ideas might have been confusing since many [36.3%] had no opinion, even though 46.3% agreed or strongly agreed with it.

Respondents were asked what they liked most about the Learning Terrace and 294 wrote in opinions. The most commonly cited factors liked by respondents were the convenient location proximate to the dorms and to some student homes [119], the good space for group work [63]. Also appreciated are the flexible furniture [wide tables, movable tables, bright seating] [32], open spaces [29], the white boards and wall [24], and the reliable and abundant technology [e.g. outlets, Wi-Fi internet] [21]. A number of respondents noted the quiet levels [16], the atmosphere [12], seating [9] and light [9]. When asked to identify what changes would most improve the Learning Terrace as a learning environment the overwhelming suggestions made were to control the level of noise architecturally [40], by scheduling or enforcing quiet times [21], creating more personal study [21] or separate [5] group spaces. Frequently, the suggestion was to make the space larger [47], adding more tables [18], chairs [16], computers [18], white boards [8], as well as markers [13] and clarity of the intended use of the space through color or atmosphere [10]. These included the general strong desire for more environments conducive to concentrated study and learning. Fifteen respondents specifically asked for longer hours of access, some suggesting 24/7 and others suggesting designated times for enforced quiet study or possible reservations for limited tables to control the number of users. The performance of the space could also be improved with numerous suggestions for adding outlets and charging capacity that also work more often [36], for stronger, faster and more reliable internet access [11], for guards that are quieter themselves [without loud cell phone alerts] [5], and for more professional help [4]. Improved maintenance also is suggested in cleaning the walls and removing smells [5]. Interest was expressed to see more technology such as displays [5] and availability of computers for student use [18]. A few expressed

the frustration with a strategy of small terraces and urged to build a new library [4], while some found this to be "perfect" [7] and wanting to see more of them on campus [8].

Occupancy data.
Analyzing the data on occupancy that we have from the fall 2011 and winter 2012 we found the following:

Over all times open and all weeks during fall, the average number of persons present during a snapshot count each hour was 15.1, which represents 23% occupancy of the 66 seats. For the winter term, the average is 26.3% [17.6]
The average occupancy during fall over the hours of opening [cross all weeks] ranged from 4% [2.8 persons] at 9 a.m. and 36% [24 persons] at 8 p.m. Winter term data show similar patterns with a range of 5.4% [10 a.m.] to 63.5% [11 p.m.].

The cluster of highest occupancy in fall [over 30%] came at the 6 p.m. [30%] and 11 p.m. [32%] hour. The facility had over 20% occupancy, consistently on average between the 2 p.m. and midnight hour slots in the fall. During winter term this highest occupancy occurred between 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. when on average over 30% of the seats were occupied.

Five times during the fall term, the number of persons in the LLT exceeded 50 or over 75% occupancy; this occurred during exam week as well as week 10. During the winter, this same high occupancy occurred thirty-three times, also during evening hours between 5 p.m. and 10 p.m. except during week 10 when occupancy during each of the 2-4 p.m. time slots also exceeded 75% occupancy [over 50 people].

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