

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0582

Tue 07 Dec 2021

15:20 - 15:40

Reading the Academic Library: An Exploration of the Conceived, Perceived and Lived Spaces of the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull

Lee Fallin¹

¹*University of Hull, Hull, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: Focusing on the perspectives of 'library users', this paper argues for a reconsideration of dominant conceptions of academic libraries as dusty repositories of books and restrictive study spaces. Using the Brynmor Jones Library (BJL) at the University of Hull as a case study and drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concepts as of space as conceived, perceived and lived, it asks: How do library users experience library space(s) in the neoliberal university?

Analysis of the research data has led to the identification of five themes that represent the different facets of academic library space: physical spaces, imagined spaces, social spaces, engagement spaces and discovery spaces. These themes challenge traditional definitions of libraries and redefine them from the perspective of those who use and work within them.

Paper: If you run a Google Image search for 'Library' you will get photo after photo of rooms full of books and bookshelves. If you are lucky, some of them will have people in them. Those people will inevitably be doing one of three things. They will be looking at the bookshelves, taking books off the shelves or they will be sat reading books. The only possible exception is the occasional photograph of a library building from the outside. The many glossy books on libraries replicate this view with pages full of photographs that show huge bookshelves framed by stunning architecture (see examples: Campbell & Pryce, 2013; Murray, 2013). This all suggests the sole purpose of libraries is the curation, storage, and use of books. However, when considered in the context of Higher Education (HE), this is all starting to look a little dated, especially in the context of technological developments and the changing nature of learning and study. Indeed, the 'brand' of academic libraries is 'often narrowly conceived' as 'libraries are about books' (Pinfield et al., 2017:49). This will leave some people wondering if academic libraries are even relevant anymore. Considering how expensive they are to run, closing the library building would make quite a nice saving for the neoliberal university. This line of thought, however, is based upon a lack of understanding of the modern academic library.

Literature shows that in response to the threats and challenges of neoliberalisation, academic libraries have undergone dramatic changes. They have invested in their spaces to offer new technology and social opportunities for students. They have made spaces people want to visit, not just for the collection, but for learning, socialisation and support. As this thesis has argued, this has made libraries attractive spaces, framing them as an essential aspect of any university and its relative competitiveness with other institutions. Academic libraries have also developed their support to help users with their information and digital literacy, equipping them to deal with the information-rich world they are living within.

This case study focused on the Brynmor Jones Library (BJL) at the University of Hull. To investigate how the BJL is experienced by library users, 11 focus groups were conducted with 40 participants. The focus groups utilised an approach based on LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® which allowed participants to physically represent their conceptualisations of the BJL and their relationship with it. Secondary data from BJL systems; an analysis of BJL spaces and plans; and a total of 57 half-hour observations were used to further explore the research question. Individuals 'read', perceive, and understand space is of utmost importance. This is theorized in Lefebvre's (1991), trialectic which shows the significance of the conceived, perceived, and lived facets of space. Students, researchers, academics and any other groups visiting an academic library are required to 'read' both familiar and unfamiliar library spaces. From this, they need to interpret how to use, behave and interact within and with such spaces.

Analysis of the research data has led to the identification of five themes that represent the different facets of academic library space: physical spaces, imagined spaces, social spaces, engagement spaces and discovery spaces. These themes challenge traditional definitions of libraries and redefine them from the perspective of those who use and work within them. Demonstrating that academic libraries are spaces valued for the creation of new knowledge; support of students and researchers; equality of access to technology and resources; and development of social opportunities for students, it emphasises the importance of academic libraries and is a rallying cry for their protection and continued development within the context of technological advancement, increased competition and reduced funding currently impacting many UK universities.

The findings of this research have demonstrated a series of problems for academic libraries. Neoliberalism is, undeniably, impacting HE. For academic libraries, this is characterised by raising costs and reducing budgets. Furthermore, fundamental questions around the need for academic libraries have been raised. Often this argument suggests online resources preclude the need for a physical library. This is, however, premised on the academic library being about collections alone. This research has demonstrated that academic library spaces are much more.

This research concludes on a rallying cry for continued investment and development of academic libraries. The library is not dead yet and must not die in the future. Academic libraries are not dusty repositories of books. They are physical, imagined, social, engagement and discovery spaces, all of which are vital to the success of students and other library users. Academic libraries cannot be complacent in their position in the university. As neoliberal higher education continues to build a sector focused on efficiency, quality and competition, there will be winners and losers. Significant investment is needed in the development of library systems or procurement of solutions to compete with these firms.

References: Campbell, J. W. P. & Pryce, W. (2013) *The library: A world history*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The production of space*. Translated from French by Nicholson-Smith, D. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Murray, S. A. P. (2013) *The library: An illustrated history*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

Pinfield, S., Cox, A. & Rutter, S. (2017) *Mapping the future of academic libraries: A Report for SCONUL*. London: SCONUL. Available online: <https://sconul.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Mapping%20the%20Future%20of%20Academic%20Libraries%20Final%20proof.pdf> [Accessed 16/02/2020].