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Asking the Right Questions: Accessibility and Library Study Rooms

This article assists administrators who want to ensure their libraries are inclusive of people with disabilities but don't know where to start. We argue that organizations should understand not only the basic dimensions of ADA law but also dimensions of disability. They should also become familiar with multiple domains of disability and proactively incorporate reflective questions posed by researchers and advocates into the library space planning process. The article uses examples of common missteps in the development of study rooms with some reflection on how to learn from the experience.

Keywords: disability; accessibility; academic libraries; space; design

Intentional Planning for Disability

In 2019, the Hunters Point Library in Queens, New York, opened to acclaim and was described as an “architectural gem” (Randle, 2019). A critic for the *New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman, first extolled the building’s “nooks and corners,” its “cushy furniture,” and its “killer view over Gantry Plaza State Park, with Manhattan in the background.” He praised the building as “among the finest and most uplifting public buildings New York has produced so far this century” while simultaneously denigrating the “pea counters” whom he blamed for unfortunate construction delays (Kimmelman, 2019). However, this same critic later reported that disabled users and parents of small children found the library to be inaccessible and unsafe. Despite technically meeting Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations, many members of the public were functionally excluded from their public library (Kimmelman, 2020). This situation might be more common than one would think. Library administrators and their teams balance multiple priorities and stakeholder groups whose needs can exist in tension: good intentions versus budgetary realities, government mandates versus local advocacy,

inclusive design versus meeting minimum legal requirements. In this column, we will be addressing the last point as it relates to designing library study rooms. We will encourage you to plan for tension points and ask good questions at every stage of the process, to move beyond meeting minimal expectations established by the ADA and towards true inclusion.

In the United States, the legal status defining someone as a person with a disability varies across regulatory bodies—to receive federal or state disability benefits and services is a different set of hurdles than one would face to receive civil rights protections as a student. For library administrators, one of the key concepts to understand is the ADA. The ADA provides standards for accessible space design (“2010 ADA standards,” 2012) as well as non-discrimination regulations to protect the civil rights of people with disabilities. (Web design, for example, is covered by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act; we mention it to make sure you are aware it exists but it is outside the scope of this paper.)

People with disabilities, according to the ADA, means people whose conditions keep them from doing one or more major life activity, including learning and working. The ADA does not explicitly identify every possible condition. Because people are often unsure about who is covered, we provide a non-exhaustive list here. People with disabilities includes people with sensory impairments (d/Deaf people, people with low vision or blindness), people with mobility impairments (e.g., wheelchair users, people who have difficulty using keyboards), people with psychiatric disabilities (e.g., depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia), people with medical disabilities or chronic illness (e.g., cancer, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease), and people with developmental disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, learning disabilities such as dyslexia, and intellectual disabilities such as Down

syndrome). While the “2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design” do not explicitly refer to most of these conditions, the ADA non-discrimination regulations mean that libraries still have an obligation to make accommodations upon request. For example, the ADA Standards only talk about minimizing surface glare on signs to support the needs of people with low vision, but a common workplace accommodation for people with epilepsy is anti-glare filters on lights and computer screens (“Epilepsy,” n.d.).

If libraries are to be truly responsive, truly accessible, to their users, we argue that library planning teams should move beyond the narrow definitions and minimum requirements of the ADA, and instead use expanded conceptions of disability utilized by researchers and advocates. If library planning teams could begin their projects with these expansive conceptions of disability in mind, they would be less likely to neglect disability during planning processes, and potentially avoid misunderstandings and conflicts with institutional partners down the road. When disabled people have needs that don’t meet normative ideas of (nondisabled) body/mind needs, organizations often take the view that the complainant is demanding special treatment and, at best, feel forced into retrofitting. These retrofits are less effective and more contentious than planning for functional diversity (Schomberg and Highby, 2020, ch. 2). Developing inclusive library spaces requires forethought, and these processes can benefit from using inclusive design practices from the start. As an example of how libraries might engage in planning for diversity, we discuss study spaces below – their purpose, contextualized descriptions of recent redesign projects in our library, and how we will do things differently in the future.

Inclusivity and Library Study Rooms

With the rise of the earliest public reading rooms of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries (at least for the upper middle classes), and now again in the present thanks to the rise of digital collections, one core role of libraries is to provide “a place of collaborative learning and community interaction” -- sometimes described as library as third place, referring to a position partway between home and work environments (Montgomery and Miller, 2011, p. 229). Viewing libraries in part as a study space (or a collection of study spaces) means we make different design decisions than if we’re viewing the library as a book warehouse or as a classroom. Academic library study spaces influence student engagement, sense of belonging, development of agency and motivation for academic success (Lundström et al., 2016). These affective factors of our built environments also influence how we “feel, hear, see, and interact with one another” and these sensory factors impact our cognitive abilities (Lundström et al., 2016, p. 414). In addition, we know that some of our students live with housing precarity and may not have their own computers or internet access, so well-equipped study spaces are also an equity issue. For students with disabilities, these elements of our built environments can mean the difference between whether they are able to fully participate in public study.

When we talk about the functional purpose of providing library study rooms, we’re talking about providing learning and social spaces that “influence how people engage with one another and whether they are able to fully participate in activities” (Lundström et al., 2016, p. 414). We also need to keep in mind that collaborative and interactive spaces, and spaces that support social bonding, might be very different than quiet spaces that support intense focus. This is more and more of an issue as libraries themselves adapt to changing expectations of them by society/academic institutions, and to the changing nature of learning. There is no one size fits all in terms of study space design.

Existing research on the space needs of different populations show a variety of factors to consider when designing study spaces, from how students enter the library to how they navigate to open study spaces or closed study rooms, to their experiences when using study spaces.

Provided below is a series of possibilities for administrators and library teams to consider, related to supporting different needs. This isn't provided to be a checklist of requirements but rather as prompts to help you move out of any "this is how we've always done it" patterns that you may not even realize you're in! In putting together these possibilities, we referenced the DO-IT Center at the University of Washington and also the BBC user experience and design guide "Neurodiversity and buildings" (n.d.) which has a less academic, compliance-based approach and is navigable via accessibility needs rather than specific conditions that fall under the neurodiversity umbrella.

Teams can start by considering the mobility needs of their users. Since at least some mobility impairments are easily identifiable by the public, this is likely the accessibility domain to which governments and contractors have been most responsive. Power-operated doors, sufficient aisle width, adjustable height tables and chairs, restrooms with sufficient space and range of movement, and elevator controls accessible to someone in a seated position can all make libraries more accessible to people with mobility impairments and people of larger and smaller size. Public-facing teams should be trained to support users who need assistive technologies to communicate or study. Consider providing mouse and keyboard alternatives in study areas with computers, for people with mobility and dexterity concerns.

Just as well known to government officials and contractors are sensory needs related to vision and hearing impairments for which at least some accommodations have

been made into law and other building regulations for several decades. To make spaces more welcoming, braille equipment and door labels help users navigate with less mediation. In addition to the use of braille, the DO-IT Center recommends reviewing availability of audio descriptions of visual content such as art displays (“How can informal,” n.d.). Other accessibility options include auditory and visual warning signals, scanners with optical character readers (OCR), computers with speech output, computers with braille screen displays and embossed output, whiteboards or tablets to support nonverbal communication, and large print texts and audio texts. For designated study rooms, informational materials such as use policies should be provided in large text with high color contrast and in braille when possible.

Less well-known, but increasingly of concern to accessibility researchers and advocates, are sensory needs related to odors and other adverse reactions that support people with chemical sensitivities or who have sensory processing disorders. Well-ventilated study spaces reduce odors and other particulates. Effective study spaces also provide low-glare lighting and are furnished with fabrics that are not overstimulating. Note that some sensory recommendations, such as advice to provide non-patterned blinds in all study rooms with windows, may need to be balanced with safety concerns.

There are other accessibility needs that library teams can include in their planning, but that will almost certainly be unknown to university partners beyond your accessibility services or teaching and learning centers. For libraries without resident experts, it is best to reach out to these centers ahead of time for their input. For example, students who use study rooms will also bring a variety of learning needs to their experiences, and study room designers can assist in making sure that everyone can use the space. This starts before students even enter the building: allowing students to reserve or cancel study rooms via text, webform, or telephone supports different

communication needs. Also consider what educational tools might support learning. Anatomical models or other visual or tactile objects can be especially helpful for students who have either sensory or attention-related disabilities; computers equipped with software that highlights and reads aloud text presented on the screen (such as Read&Write) supports students with low vision, fatigue related to chronic illness, and anxiety issues that affect focus; access to scanners with OCR capability allows students to convert assigned texts to machine-readable formats; quiet study areas minimize distractions; and tables large enough to keep all needed materials in sight are especially helpful for students with attention disorders.

Students also bring a variety of social and emotional needs to keep in mind, and proactive library teams can ask reflective questions within their planning. Libraries with active partners physically situated within learning commons environments might best be able to collaborate in the following areas. For example, do the libraries work with partners to provide study support at predictable times to support routine; allow students to signal how much they want to socialize by providing occasional drop-in co-curricular, academic engagement, support, or tutoring activities and offering a mix of social and quiet spaces for them; find methods for students to indicate that they are uncomfortable with direct eye-contact from library workers; or create procedures to follow up with students who suddenly change their study routines (i.e. how to reach out to a regular who stops showing up, without violating privacy expectations)? As universities increasingly dedicate resources to “online only” learning, might we also ask whether it is possible for libraries to support “library ambience” in online spaces, for students who can’t visit the physical library for distance, health, mobility, or other reasons?

Library teams will also want to consider body/mind/culture needs, some of which have been anticipated in one way or another for at least a decade, if not more. Food (ideally with sugars, such as candy bars and/or sodas) and water should be available for students who need it, sometimes in an emergency. Gender-neutral accessible restrooms for people of all genders, ideally with baby-stations, are a must. Seating near service areas so students with pain or fatigue can rest while waiting in line is ideal. Foot baths for universities with significant Muslim populations, and quiet reflection areas for people from all faiths, demonstrate a welcoming environment. While these considerations will probably not fall inside a study room itself, their availability does support students engaged in long periods of study.

By now, most administrators might recognize that what they really need are 1) a series of brief reflective questions informed by a basic scholarship framework that allows planning teams to self-interrogate their projects; 2) a checklist for their teams to employ; 3) key partners in learning and facilities throughout the university who will encourage administrators to ask hard questions; and, ideally, if budget and training permits, 4) a librarian specifically trained in accessibility and Universal Design.

Learning from Doing: Organizational Challenges

Over the past decade, Library Services at Minnesota State University, Mankato has initiated several projects to enhance the utilization of space and respond to the needs of the university community. This effort was part of a longer-range plan envisioned by library management, faculty, and staff to provide a more welcoming environment for multiple uses. These activities were carried over the past ten to fifteen years, and mostly focused on the main, or first floor. They included the development of new quiet study spaces for individual study (one with computers, one without); a conference room available to the university community; new gender-neutral, accessible restrooms; a

collaboration space; and most recently, the development of four main floor group study rooms with a series of booths for study between them. The four group study rooms complemented our current suite of thirteen study rooms located on the second and third floors and brought our total number of study rooms to seventeen to serve a campus of approximately 14,000 students. The study rooms provide centralized and attractive group study spaces, close to the circulation and reference desks, and printing and scanning areas. The spaces complement what visitors to campus initially see as they enter the library and quickly scan across the open-concept first floor to ascertain the scope of services and available modes of study.

Our most recent project, completed in March 2020 as the pandemic hit the country (ironically, our physical library closed on the very day we were to celebrate the completion of the new group study rooms), added four new study rooms with a section of six booths between them. The paths between the booths and the study room doors, while technically wide enough for a wheelchair, do not allow much necessary manoeuvrability for one to open the bulky doors from a seated position. The doors themselves do not have automatic openers. The tables within the group study rooms are neither movable nor height adjustable. The booths themselves are far too deep and narrow to be easily accessible, and someone with a wheelchair or other mobility device would not be able to leave their device next to the booth for risk of blocking access to the study room doors. When we met with designers for this space, we asked several questions to make sure these spaces would be accessible, but we didn't realize at the time that we needed to be more direct about our desire to go beyond the minimum ADA legal requirements.

Our university conference room was likewise not designed with the foresight we recommend in this essay. Most people wouldn't note it as they walked into the room.

The room itself is highly functional and aesthetically pleasing. However, as we later searched for more ways to add height-adjustable tables on each floor, we decided to add tables to recently renovated smaller conference or seminar-style rooms. We discovered that pre-existing furniture or the lack of electrical outlets in the flooring meant that the otherwise useful tables are placed in the corner of a room, thus setting the tables apart from the rest of the design and tagging the user as somehow ‘different’. Pre-planning, thinking ahead about the needs of multiple users, would have allowed us to create at least one table that provided needed functionality embedded in the overall space.

In retrospect, the complementary projects (they appear similar in design and style, for example, which creates a sense of uniformity across the open space that constitutes the first floor), would have benefited from a deliberate and wide-ranging exploration of both narrow and expanded concepts of accessibility that resembles the previous discussion. While the renovated areas are functional and aesthetically pleasing and do meet ADA requirements, we would argue that they are not truly accessible.

Lessons Learned: Designing the Future

Disability, how it’s conceived, defined, and pathologized, is often a matter of degrees of difference. One difficulty we have in knowing what exactly it means to be disabled is that medical professionals and others in positions of power are often the ones who do the writing and speaking, through the lens of a nondisabled person, in a way that disabled people may find both pathologizing and harmful (Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019). We have argued that library planning teams need to start with more expansive understandings of disability than those provided by most institutions. This expansive view needs to be informed by the latest research and embedded into planning processes.

Best practices might include inviting disabled people to the planning table, including disability advocates and researchers in discussions, and offering a more expansive and inclusive user experience (UX) analysis from the beginning of projects, rather than responding to problems later on.

As Ahmed (2021) observes, institutions often create barriers to complaint, isolating and silencing complainants and trapping them in Kafkaesque trials with no resolution. What we are working towards, however, is to make the foreseeable complaint, to the best of our abilities, part of the design process. Our goal should be to bring library users in before we start a design project; possibly making introductions to people with similar complaints via focus groups; designing focus groups intentionally to make participation low risk (unlike formal complaint processes); asking users to tell us what they need from us; and making their aggregate complaints public through our design plans, our funding requests, and through the improvements we make to our spaces.

While some of what libraries do is based on a transactional approach to service, like the IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) focus on the number of things checked out, much of library ethos is (or should be) built on what Vargo & Lusch (as cited in Lundström, 2016) call service-dominant logic or what Grönroos (1994, as cited in Lundström, 2016) calls relationship marketing, "which emphasizes that creating and maintaining the relationship with the customer is far better marketing than concentrating on sales and transactions". One way of engaging in this is to invite users to co-create value. As Rabinowitz (2021) notes, even as we count transactions, we should be paying attention to "what the interactions can teach us about how students think and write, and how we can continue to improve how we provide support."

Actionable Ideas

- As a first step, use a checklist such as the one from Syracuse University’s Project ENABLE (“ADA Library Accessibility Checklist,” 2011), to begin developing your knowledge and skills in taking an accessibility approach to library spaces. Ideally, make this a team activity so knowledge and skills are developed more broadly across your library.
- Establish protocols for gathering feedback from those in your community, positive and negative. This may include non-judgmental observations of use patterns, listening without defensiveness, and actively asking questions. Make this a routine practice.

Conclusion

Making library study spaces more accessible is an ongoing project. We have to plan for diversity, which sometimes means asking good questions and listening to uncomfortable answers. As Maya Angelou famously said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

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