Supporting the 21st Century Learner: Building the Multimedia Production Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Overview

At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, instructors are increasingly utilizing active, group, and participatory teaching methods and are offering students opportunities to opt in to more creative assignments requiring the use of advanced technologies in support of multimedia projects. Traditionally, video projects would be expected from discourses such as Film Studies, Journalism and Communications students; the insurgence of this type of multimedia project has come to subjects from Anthropology to History, and the incoming required Freshman Writing course now has a built-in unit which specifically invites writing and research in a variety of technological media outside of the traditional research paper.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst Library system aims to anticipate the needs of instructors and students by tailoring student spaces to support teaching and learning goals. Working closely with the Office of Information Technologies, we are building a Multimedia Production space to meet the increasing needs of general students as the curriculum continues to change. This space will include video and audio recording and production areas, as well as video and audio recording equipment that students may borrow, hardware and software to edit multimedia projects, and areas within which students can view their finished projects and practice their presentation skills in front of their peers.

This presentation will outline the process by which the University Libraries is creating this multimedia production space, including historical background on the Learning Commons, needs assessment, facilities planning, and instruction coordination.

Libraries at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

There are four library locations on the 1,450 sq acre Amherst campus: the Image Collection Library, Music Reserves Library, Science and Engineering Library, and the W.E.B. Du Bois Library. These libraries, with a professional and student staff of around 200, serve a population of over 26,900 full time enrolled (FTE) students[1], as well as the public, at a large land-grant research institution[2]. The W.E.B Du Bois Library, located at the center of campus is over 26 stories tall and is commonly referred to as 'the tower.' This library is the geographic and programmatic epicenter of academic life on the Amherst campus. However, the W.E.B. Du Bois Library, less than ten years ago, was not nearly as vibrant and frequented by patrons as is it today. The increase in patronage and revitalization in programming and student activity can largely be attributed to the development of the Learning Commons.

[1] ARL statistics report
[2] Founded in 1863, as 'Mass Aggie'

Development of the Learning Commons at UMass

In 2004, the space in the W.E.B. Du Bois was that of a library experiencing change. While the online catalog had long ago replaced the card catalog, and some computers were made available to students for basic word processing and web access, it was clear that there was a need to provide more. At this time, there was no technology presence other than a few computer labs in the upper tower. Students' increasing reliability on the internet for resources became part of a driving need to provide more equipment as well as more advanced software. The increase in laptop use also meant that the library needed to provide space and connections for mobile computing devices.

However, the Learning Commons is more than just about study space; this space embodies intangible concepts all of which support student learning. There are many factors that combine together to create a Learning Commons such as the resources and support it provides, its ability to engage users in connection to "innovative pedagogy", along with providing a social space in which to collaborate. The user-centric model is meant to provide a space that is relevant and current to the needs of the students, hopefully in connection to their academic goals, but not limited to academia.

When the Learning Commons opened in 2005, students were provided with spaces to work collaboratively, study individually, and receive support from many different service specialists. Today, specialized services in the Learning Commons include:

- Technology support from the Office of Information Technologies (OIT)
- Research support from University Librarians
- Circulation and Reserves
- Assistive Technologies Center
- University Writing Center
- International Programs Office (for study abroad programs)
- Academic Advising
- Learning Resource Center (tutoring, on the 10th floor)

Over the past seven years, the University Libraries have been consistently assessing[3] the usage patterns of the Learning Commons, to determine its efficacy as a central student hub on campus. Due to the increasing demand on the services and space within the library, the Learning Commons underwent an additional expansion in 2010. In addition to adding more space, the library was looking to add more relevant services and resources, in anticipation of growing student needs. In 2008, a group[4] of faculty and librarians convened to discuss the increasing demand for multimedia support in the Learning Commons. Following an environmental scan of several neighboring universities, this group recommended that a multimedia center be established as a collaborative Libraries and OIT effort. Shortly after these recommendations were made, several multimedia editing stations, or 'pods' were installed in the Learning Commons as a pilot for how students would utilize these advanced stations, and what support services would be necessary to operate these pods.

[3] All data publicly available at: http://www.massbedrock.org/about-the-libraries/assessment-and-statistics/
[4] OIT Multimedia Services Task Force

Increasing Multimedia Needs

In the year following the implementation of the multimedia pilot in the Learning Commons, reports from faculty looking to include multimedia projects in their courses spiked; the Freshman Writing Course, which touches around 4,000 undergraduates annually, began their inquiry of available technologies and support for new media projects. Collecting similar reports throughout the year, at the end of 2010 the libraries reinvigorated a new iteration of the Multimedia Task Force, whose charge would be to aggressively move forward on plans to create a new multimedia production center in the W.E.B. Du Bois Library. The task force recognized that while they were provided access to OIT's annual pulse surveys[5] on student and faculty technology use, additional needs assessment methods were necessary. A combination of site visits, faculty testimonials, survey and focus group results were used by the group to determine the optimal combination of space, equipment and services to meet student needs.

Continued Needs Assessment

Focus groups for three separate constituencies: students, faculty, and faculty support staff, were held, all of which inquired with each group on their specific understanding and uses of multimedia and new media technology in and outside of the classroom setting. The intended demographic of each group was to include a diverse cross-section of participants; the focus groups had participation of departments and programs ranging from Film Studies to Accounting and History, and the results provided a well-rounded perspective on general undergraduate student need. Overwhelmingly, there was a shared response by group participants that the definition of "multimedia" varies broadly, and that the self-perceived expertise in multimedia production is similarly capricious. Shared themes amongst all responding participants was a considerable concern for the training and support of multimedia project production; with a strong desire to create multimedia projects beyond their current skill set, participants understood that while projects such as digital storytelling provided rich content, the lack of understanding of the production process so greatly hindered the original conceptualization of research, that the investment (particularly that of *time*) simply wasn't worth it.

The biggest takeaway from these preliminary focus groups was the need for a solid support system, including full time staff and students, instruction sessions (workshops), and extended hours of operation for support. This was not a surprising outcome, given that we had received similar responses in focus groups conducted to assess the Learning Commons, several years prior to the start of the multimedia production space discussion. Consistently across any project a shared theme can be found: a technologically enhanced space without support is doomed to fail.

[5] Surveys distributed to all enrolled students, inquiring on technology use

Facilities and Space Planning

Given the results from focus groups and surveys, the space plan for the multimedia production center began taking shape. The working group defined the three greatest physical areas of expressed need amongst students:

- Quiet space for audio recording
- Appropriately lighted area for video recording
- Project review and presentation practice space

Additionally, instruction on the use of these spaces had been expressed as a need, so in addition to physical rooms and equipment, training and instruction space needed to be incorporated into the initial plan as well. Recommendations from the group included:

- Consultation area
- Staff office area
- Training/instruction area
- Multimedia editing area
- Sound-dampened/proofed audio recording areas
- Video/green screen recording area
- Post-production project review/presentation practice area

In order to build these spaces in the intended approximately 25,000 sq ft area, there were several inhibiting factors that needed to be dealt with first:

- Collections currently stored on floor – music monuments and media
- Relocation of media/music monuments to 6th floor
- Remove cage and gates (dependent on Music group security recommendations)
- Remove/reconfigure circ desk (based on facilities electrical recommendations)
- Install partitions for recommended areas
- Electrical reconfiguration – June 2013 (as part of campus-wide update).
- Ascertain power requirements for entire floor
- Confirm electrical closet space allocations
- Considerations for subdivision of space: HVAC, air circulation, fire code (strobe sightlines, fire alarms)
- Noise abatement
- Electrical
- Staffing

While planning a project to build a single space, there were in reality several projects running concurrently, all of which would impact the central development of the multimedia space. Even with several inhibiting factors, the working group persisted in recommendations to hire a full time employee, as the 'Multimedia Production Center Coordinator[6].' Having a coordinator or program director during the space planning process

[6] FTE remains in approval processing system

is a key determinant in that space's future success. As of September 2012, a coordinator has yet to be hired by the Libraries to manage and plan the multimedia production space.

Instruction Coordination

Based on the findings from the initial focus groups, the creation of instructional workshops was seen as an essential component to this larger project. Questions during focus groups that were particularly helpful in determining this need were:

- What are some obstacles that are keeping you from being assigned your ideal multimedia project?
- What kind of training or assistance would you need to produce multimedia?
- What do you see as the greatest obstacles to student multimedia production?

Some of the largest obstacles reported by students in multimedia production were not understanding how to develop a multimedia project, not knowing how to use specialized computer equipment and software, and not having the available resources to develop a multimedia project.

Following the determination that instructional workshops needed to be developed, a group of instructional technologists, information technology support staff, faculty and librarians were constructed to discuss the possibility of offering training sessions on multimedia project creation. Three major areas of need were identified for training:

- Multimedia Project Development
  Development of a preliminary project plan, including storyboard

- Media Management
  Understanding how to choose the best file types for your project, and how to manage the sharing and preservation of files

- Getting the Shot
  Hands-on experience with video and audio equipment, to ensure optimal media capture

It was decided that these workshops would be offered to students in the library, even before construction on the new space was completed; the instruction of these sessions began in fall 2012, several months prior to the anticipated opening[7] of the multimedia production space. Though construction is still underway, students will begin familiarizing themselves with the library as a central location for multimedia support on campus.

[7] Spring 2013 is desired, but delays may occur, due to necessary electrical upgrades

Conclusion

While the project of building the Multimedia Production Center is well underway, it is important to continually assess student needs at the University, to ensure that we to move forward in the right direction. To get a full picture of student needs, the libraries must work closely with faculty and other student support services on campus to indicate current trends, movements and available resources. The creation of a new space may be an exciting prospect, but keeping in mind that the completion is not the end, and that change is always necessary, is essential.

References

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