Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc.

Enhancing Higher Education, Theory and Scholarship

Proceedings of the

30th HERDSA Annual Conference [CD-ROM]

8-11 July 2007
Adelaide, Australia

Suggested format for citing papers:

Author (2007) Title of Paper, in *Enhancing Higher Education, Theory and Scholarship, Proceedings of the 30th HERDSA Annual Conference [CD-ROM]*, Adelaide, 8-11 July.

Published 2007 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, MILPERRA NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN 1441 001X
ISBN 0 908557 72 8

Rovers at the border: the double framing of student rovers in learning commons

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The emerging trend among some university libraries towards 'information commons' and 'learning commons', has been accompanied by a strong interest in deploying student advisors. However, student advisors can be framed according to two quite different models. One model frames student advisors as first point of contact in a stratified service delivery system. Another quite different model frames student advisors as student mentors by drawing on the long history of SI (supplemental instruction) programs and mentoring programs. Are these different ways of framing Rovers competing or complementary? Or does this double definition of student advisors in Learning Commons in fact accurately represent their ambiguous role and status? This paper aims to tease out for discussion some of the assumptions and implications at issue in these different ways of framing student advisors that have arisen in a pilot implementation of a student rover program in a Learning Commons at Victoria University.

Keywords: learning commons, student rovers, student mentors, communities of learning

In 2005-6, the Victoria University (VU) library moved to become an Information Commons: a seamless ‘one-stop shop’ with enhanced provision of technological, informational and communication resources to facilitate student learning in a student-friendly environment (Remy 2004; Burke 2004; Church 2005,). Then during 2007, the Information Commons further evolved into a Learning Commons (LC) with a mission ‘not merely to integrate technology, reference ... and services but to facilitate learning by whatever means works best’ (Remy 2004, p. 5). According to Keating and Gabb (2005) the development of a LC at VU is ‘part of a wider transformation in VU towards a culture of learning that is learning-oriented, learner-centred, flexible, collaborative, university-wide and community-building’ (p. 2).

As part of the LC implementation process, a pilot program was funded to explore and evaluate the use of Student Rovers in the VU LC. This Student Rover project was based on the belief that many students would find it easier to approach Student Rovers first for guidance or assistance, before they approach staff; that Student Rovers will be a mode of peer support in a student space, whose role will complement and add to the role of Library, IT and TLS staff; and that engaging high-achieving students in the Learning Commons will send a positive message to the university as a whole about the strengths of our students (Keating & Gabb 2005). And so the role of Student Rovers in a LC was defined as:

- assisting with basic student queries related to using and locating core facilities, information resources, software and hardware
- helping students to clarify and articulate basic issues related to their learning strategies

- directing students to options or to further information that may assist them, or referring them to relevant IT, Library or Learning staff present, or accessible from, the Learning Commons, and other services such as Counselling where appropriate.

But despite this specification of student rovers and their role in a LC, there remains a fundamental question about what 'voice' student rovers speak in the name of and on the basis of what 'authority' or 'fund of knowledge' they proffer advice. Within an 'information commons', it is fairly straightforward: they speak in the name of procedural information and know-how concerning protocols for using or interacting with a range of technological, informational, communicational systems and on the basis of the expertise of Library and IT staff.

The shift from information commons to learning commons can be framed in two ways. One framing posits a learning commons as simply the addition of a new line of services (learning services) to the two services (IT and Library) offered by information commons. The second framing is transformative, not additive: it reframes the overall meaning of a commons from delivery of resources and information to a 'collaborative place of learning'. On this view, a LC is framed as a domain of student 'communities of learning', as a student space that encourages the development of shared reflections around learning strategies. On this view, a LC is a space that encourages students to engage in learning conversations, as a meeting ground, a 'safe house', where students meet and exchange understandings of how to become a successful student, a place where students can compare and evaluate different understandings, strategies, and approaches to their work and discuss/confirm their understanding of requirements and expectations, and learn how to formulate and engage in reflective discussions about academic study. Framing the LC in this way, as a place where students express and crystallise their 'academic folk wisdom' frames it as a place of collaborative conversation and interpretation, not just individual internalisation of the procedural routines of technical systems or cognitive learning processes. Thus, on this view a LC is not simply the addition, integration or co-location of student learning services into an existing IC; it is an expression of the student body itself as a 'community of learners'.

Two ways of framing student rovers

These two ways of framing an LC - a Service model and a Community of Learning model give rise to two ways of interpreting and designing the work of LC Rovers (see **Table 1: Two interpretations of student rovers**).
They are:

- LC Rovers as 1st tier Service Workers staffing an Information Kiosk
- LC Rovers as Student Mentors for a community of learners

Table 1: Two interpretations of Student Rovers

	Kiosk model	Mentor model
Represents - speaks 'on behalf of'	Library, IT and SLU	Student body as community of learning
student problems focused on	subskills: rule-based procedures -'how to' , 'where is'	understanding the academic game - 'why?', 'what is...?', 'what if...?'
Position in relation to dissemination of knowledge	1st tier of structural hierarchy	key node in horizontal network
Worker Model (Reich 1993)	roving in-person-service-worker	Mentor, symbolic worker
Authority & credibility	Derived from rover training	Derived from own success as student & from rover training
Skill level on Dreyfus (1992) scale	Novice (level 1)	Competent (level 3)

Even if these two conceptualisations of LC Student Rovers are finally combined or blended, it is important to first separate them out theoretically.

Rovers as first tier service workers

First tier service workers are unskilled front counter workers who deal with routine enquiries covering simple rule-governed tasks, but refer any issues of understanding or judgement to professionally trained staff. As 1st tier service workers staffing a Kiosk, rovers would be the first point of contact in the provision of services to the LC for the three University departments involved: Library, IT, and academic language and learning issues. LC Rovers, on this view, would have the role of siphoning off the mundane and routine enquiries received by these three departments thereby freeing departmental staff to concentrate on more complicated requests. Requests for help beyond the technical know-how of LC Rovers would be referred to the 2nd tier of help.

This model of LC Rover as 1st tier Service Workers is based on a Help Desk or Information Kiosk model in which a body of esoteric technical knowledge and expertise concerning the intricacies of technical and informational systems such as Information technologies and library database systems is held by highly trained professionals. When the general public first interact with these systems, the same procedural issue of 'how to do something' arises for each individual client. LC rovers are simply one strategy (along with FAQ sheets, short training sessions, and online information sheets) for coping with this unending stream of individual requests for 'low-level' procedural know-how.

This model of LC Rover as 1st tier Service Workers means that student rovers deal with most learning issues, as opposed to IT or Library issues, by referring queries on to other, more expert, sources of advice or information. On this model they are admonished to resist mobilising their own understandings of academic learning as a source of advice—something they are constantly tempted to do.

Rovers as mentors for communities of learning

However, what if student rovers are framed as student mentors for communities of learning, as students who have demonstrated their understanding of academic institutions and expectations through their excellent academic results? Different possibilities now open up for framing the work of student rovers. The credibility of LC Rovers as Student Mentors now

rests on the fact that other students perceive them as successful students. The ability of LC Rovers to assist students will now rest on their own experience together with regular and ongoing reflective conversations with other rovers and the staff supporting them.
A key role of LC Rovers as Student Mentors would be to deal with 'misunderstandings of the task', not only procedural matters of how to interact with technical systems.

But dealing with such misunderstanding involves subtle explanations. It is essential that LC Rovers continue to develop their own reflective understandings of these matters. This will be achieved by regular debriefing through which a rich body of cases and examples are shared, so that, as a group, the LC Rovers gradually develop a body of knowledge and attunement of understanding and judgement concerning what advice is called for. With the development of a collaborative learning culture in the LC, it is envisaged that LC Rovers might even mediate with Faculty by organising ad hoc sessions when students lack the knowledge to accomplish a particular assessment task adequately or by need clarification of 'what to expected'.

If Rovers are drawn from the same diverse backgrounds as students, then over time there should emerge a spread of student-based 'academic folk wisdoms' mediating between English academic cultures and student home educational cultures. (The current cohort of rovers at VU consists of two Anglo-Celtic students, the rest ranging from Turkish to Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Indian, Lebanese and Croat backgrounds.)

Validating advice

Of course a power for good is also a power of bad: it is possible that these cultures of learning could take the form of cheat schemes or cultures that transmit debased or corrupt learning practices. To guard against this, it is imperative that Student Learning Unit be involved in the selection, training, debriefing of Rovers, and that strict guidelines regarding quality and evaluation be instituted. This will not be easy because insofar as the role of Rovers is to proffer advice about learning strategies or understanding of the task, the efficacy of this advice is dialectical and dialogic; that is, what advice is offered depends on 'where a student is at'—their current understanding of 'what is expected'. Whereas a request for information can be satisfied in an identical way every time, a request for advice about 'what to do' has to be handled on a case-by-case basis. Even if there are some relevant or reliable 'rules of thumb' or generalisations, there are always exceptions. In fact in matters of student learning, exceptions may be the rule.

Conclusion

The emergence of Learning Commons raises interesting questions about how to frame the work of student rovers: does a LC simply add learning topics to the Kiosk services that rovers already provide on IT and Library processes and resources in Information Commons? Or should student rovers offer learning advice *as students*, as students with reasoned, validated understandings of academic learning strategies in a collaborative 'place of learning'?

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