Neither Fish nor Fowl: Placing Student Rovers in Learning Commons

The transformation of VU Information Commons into Learning Commons is intended to create a new kind of learning space, a space that does not simply provide technologies, information, services and resources for student learning, but more importantly provides a learningful place where student learning is actively supported and enhanced. There were two primary elements to this more interventionist approach: architectural features were redesigned to be more attractive and cater more holistically to a wider range of student activities, including silent study, noisy collaborative teams, relaxed coffee drinking, solitary reading and websurfing; and secondly, learning support services were introduced into the Learning Commons space. These learning support services consisted of two components: traditional learning support services provided by staff; and a new student rover program in which students supported the learning of other students. The role of these student rovers was specified 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 by referring them to relevant IT, Library or Learning staff present or accessible from the Learning Commons, or to other services beyond the confines of the Learning Commons such as Faculty Advisors or Counselling

Indeterminacy of Rover Role

However, placing the rovers within the Learning Commons has been especially interesting because, located ambiguously between the roles of staff and student, rovers are liminal and do not fit seamlessly into existing institutional identities and roles. This novelty and indeterminancy of student rovers allows others to project their own competing assumptions and understandings onto the rovers. These differences in assumption and understanding reveal themselves most emphatically at the point of spatial placement of the rovers. For designing spaces and assigning places within spaces is no neutral technical (architectural) matter; quite the contrary, discussions and decisions around space and place form the terrain on which socio-political issues of institutional status, relationships, power and authority are negotiated.

Although research is underway attempting to address the larger question: How does the placement of rovers impact on the learning of/by/within the Learning Commons as a learning space? this section restricts itself to exploring the question: How do different placings of rovers in the learning space impute different identities and institutional status? What identities and roles do different placements assign, allow or encourage for rovers and their work in the Learning Commons?

In the abstract, four scenarios might be posited for framing the socio-institutional identity and status of rovers. Each scenario suggests a different spatial placement of rovers within the Learning Commons as a space.

- rovers are 'students as staff' adding a new rung to the existing service model

- rovers are student mentors dealing with more generic academic skills

- rovers constitute a newly emergent role - 'students who support the learning of other students'

- rovers continue as shadowy liminal, slightly illegitimate, in-between figure shuttling back and forth between the lived worlds of students and abstract institutional realities of academia.

However these abstract specifications intersect with the concrete physical spatiality of the three different Learning Commons. After three years of operation and trialling different placements, what has become clear is that there is no generally shared consensus on how to physically or semiotically 'place' rovers in the learning space across the three Learning Commons. The spatial particularities of each of the Learning Commons as an architectural space impacts on both the range of possible placements for rovers and on the socio-institutional meanings assigned to the rovers through these placements.

Settled or nomadic placement

One key question is: should rovers have a 'place', a rover station such as a rover desk or table, or should they on the other hand be constantly mobile, 'roving' the Learning Commons looking for and inviting queries from students? The fact that this issue of a settled visible place versus nomadic roving has arisen repeatedly at all three Learning Commons but for different reasons points to deep tensions within (perceptions of) the rover role.

In the abstract, it is easy to spell out the advantages and disadvantages of these two ways of placing rovers. Placing rovers as nomads continually on the move has the advantage that they are more available so that students experiencing problems can seek assistance with the mere-est eye contact.

However there are downsides to being nomadic:

- rovers will be 'on their feet' for four hours which is very tiring; continually scanning student's faces can be interpreted as overly intrusive

- constant 'hovering help' is at odds with encouraging students to develop learning to learn skills

- being continually on the move also means that there is no identifiable 'place' where students know to go to in order to seek assistance from a rover

- finally, rovers also need to spend time on a computer contributing to the online rover community, an activity that are critical to building rover teams as a community of practice.

On the other hand, placing rovers in a settled rover 'place', such as a visible rover desk or rover table also has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that:

- rovers feel that they have more recognition and more status by occupying a visibly marked place

- they do not have to continually rove or patrol the learning space, especially when there is not much 'action'

- they can spend time not devoted to responding to student queries, checking and contributing to the online rover blog.

The disadvantages of a settled rover station are that:

- sitting at a desk or table institutes a boundary between rovers and other students

- students may perceive rovers as no different in essence from other support staff

- because rovers can seem absorbed in computer work, students may hesitate to approach the desk and interrupt them to ask for help.

The other key placement issue for rovers is that if they are provided with a visible rover station, what form should this station take? Should it be a purpose-built rover service desk or a minimalist mobile table?

Different places for different spaces

We now describe these issues in terms of the specificities of the Learning Commons respectively together with some representative tensions and anecdotes.

Learning Commons A accommodates around 160 students. No identifiable place for rovers was architecturally designated or marked for rovers in this space. Many of its student population are international students who are very technology-savvy but need to learn the particular procedures of an Australian academic library, IT systems together with academic conventions and expectations. In Learning Commons A, rovers were welcomed as adding a roving dimension that could take pressure off the over-worked library service team coping with enquiries from International students. However rovers eventually determined that they would like to establish their own 'place', a Rover Station, in fact a small table with an A3 poster hanging down the front and a laptop on it. Rovers in this team insisted that this identifiable place gave them a higher profile and established their identity within the learning space and argued that students would know where to come for help.

Library staff were not convinced and wondered whether rovers were simply sitting doing their own academic work or checking out Facebook. At one point the Rover Desk was removed in order to compel rovers into more peripatetic 'roving' of the learning space, roving that punctuated by short

standing rests close to the main service desk. This undermined the efforts of the rovers to establish their own identity distinct from the service delivery model. Currently rovers within this Learning Commons are operating across an eclectic range of placement styles. There is again a designated rover station, a small table with laptop. Some rovers spend most of their time sitting at that desk; others mostly 'rove'; some are even invited behind the official service desk.

In clear contrast with Learning Commons A, Learning Commons B is a large open space that was redesigned to provide more computer seats, tables for collaborative work, and lounging areas for student socialising. It caters to a slightly smaller student population than Learning Commons A. The service desk was made less intrusive and a rover station established closer to the student computer seating area. The rover station was extremely imposing: whereas the staff service desk was long and low, the rover service desk was high and long—over 2 metres long with a computer station at one end, and so high that rovers could only just peer over it when standing. Yet it had no signage nor identification to inform students who 'the students in blue Teeshirts' were or what they did.

As a large library where many staff were uncomfortable with the overall change to a Learning Commons itself, rovers were framed as easy symbols of this unwelcome change process. Other service units joining the Learning Commons (Learning support services and Careers) were also ambivalent about locating their services within the Learning Commons. Again, it was easy for these feelings to find a target in the rovers. As a result, it has taken a long time for this team of rovers to be accepted as regular part of the Learning Commons. Much of this tension has revolved around the rover station. On the one hand it established a strongly defined 'place' and identity for rovers, distinct from the service desk; on the other, the dimensions of the rover station created an intimidating boundary between rovers and students, suggesting that rovers are not students, but rather some sort of quasi-staff. This has made it harder for rovers in this Learning Commons to develop friendly relations with staff and students. Yet some rovers from this team argue that precisely because of this history, they have become the strongest team!

Learning Commons C, located on a small campus, consists in the redesign of a small space catering for around 40 students. It comprises three consulting rooms for IT, learning and career support services, a room of computer seats for students to access language and learning support staff. Rovers have no designated 'place' or 'station', but nor were they invited to be part of the existing service delivery team, as with Learning Commons A. Instead, they were expected to stand in designated place where they could see students and be themselves seen by service delivery staff. Symbolically this felt more like surveillance than service. Because this Learning Commons is such a small space, the placing of rovers has still not been finally resolved. Part of the problem is that the space is almost too small and there are often too few students to really 'rove' around the space without being over-intrusive or feeling silly.

Yet to simply sit at a rover station also seems too static and passive. Because the space is so small and the numbers of students early in the day and in the late afternoon few, rovers at this Learning Commons have had to figure out what to do with themselves during these 'dead times' when their services are not required and they are waiting for queries. As a generalisation, female rovers in this Learning Commons have evolved a practice of attaching themselves to 'needy students' who require more extensive assistance with assignment work or mastering software; the males, not as skilled at connecting with students, tend to play computer games or do their own study. Both strategies have been looked on unfavourably by some staff: the first is open to the accusation of having 'favourites'; the latter to the charge of 'not doing their job even though being paid'—like shop assistants who read novels while waiting for customers. However, there is talk of extending this Learning Commons space. Perhaps an enlargement of space and student numbers would enable the rovers to 'rove' more whilst also having a designated rover station separate from the service desk.

Representative Anecdotes

First Anecdote: Some service delivery staff complained to the Rover Supervisor that some rovers at Learning Commons C had 'favourites' and that they should be instructed to avoid this. The assumption behind this criticism is that rovers were not acting in the impartial, neutral, more distanced manner expected of professionals in dealings with clients. In other words, the assumption is that rovers are located on the staff side of a staff-student interface, typically realised and symbolised by a desk at which professional and client are seated opposite each other. However the framing of rovers as quasi-professionals can be juxtaposed by its counterpart where rovers are framed as students, and in fact as students embedded in sociocultural networks and relationships, connections that can be mobilised and provide a medium for enacting rover work.

In fact to emphasis this aspect of rover work, the Rover Supervisor insists that rovers should smile, make friends and generally develop friendly relations with students. In their *End Of Shift Reports* some rovers write warmly about connecting up again with their regulars or chatting with students—both activities strongly supported by the Rover Supervisor. Moreover as the cultural backgrounds of students fairly closely mirrors the profile of the student body, it is inevitable that students from minority groups are drawn to the Learning Commons and find it a safer place to be in when greeted by one of their own - sometimes in language. As one Sudanese rover noted: 'When I first meet a new student from my background it is rare that we speak in English'.

So we can observe two different conceptions of rovers at work here. One frames rovers as professionals or quasi-professionals who should set aside their non-professional relationships while at work. The other frames rovers as students whose impact on the ethos of the learning space is transmitted not simply by responding professionally to queries, but by drawing new previously

marginalised networks of students into the learning space and helping make the space feel like a culturally and psychologically safe place.

One final point before moving to the next anecdote: we are becoming more and more convinced that most tertiary students are lonely and meet or become friends with very few other students whilst studying at tertiary institutions. Many local students rely on their school networks for friendship and connection; those without these pre-existing networks, rural or international students, can have a very lonely time indeed. So, one of the roles of rovers is to enact and display the behaviours of greeting, chatting and making friends with other students. In this way the Learning Commons can be a place for meeting other students and feeling more socially connected, an activity space where meeting and getting to know others is an accepted and expected feature of the space. So, from one perspective this socialising is viewed as unprofessional and not 'doing one's job'; from the other, it is seen as providing a new and significant affordance within the Learning Commons, an affordance that cannot be provided by staff bound by professional rules of distance, nor by individual students locked into their own shy individualities or silent marginalities.

Another anecdote heightens the contradictions around these understandings of rovers and their work. There were a number of African female rovers who wear hijabs. Inevitably they attracted other African women into the Learning Commons who on entering or leaving would spend time with the rovers. After a while this took the form of sitting in a row of chairs along behind the rover desk, presumably a familiar spatio-cultural arrangement. However, some staff and students found this confronting. To approach a high desk behind which were arraigned six or more women in flowing garments and striking hijab chatting in languages other than English or seriously discussing study issues was simply too incongruent and disconcerting. Clearly there were elements of cross-cultural misunderstanding and racism in this, yet the high visibility of these women meant that rovers were being interpreted as 'students just sitting back and chatting with their friends', not as 'rovers engaging in the work of ensuring that students feel at home in the Learning Commons and are learning to engage in metacognitive conversations about learning'.

This took place in Learning Commons B, the space with the most marked and architecturally prominent rover station, so staff and students were receiving contradictory messages: on the one hand, the imposing desk symbolised the separation and distinct status of rovers from students as if rovers were professional quasi-staff; on the other, the semi-circle of women seated behind the desk but back from it against the wall could be interpreted as a misuse of the place for personal non-professional social activities and a withdrawal of service from the desk. This was a difficult issue to resolve as the African rovers insisted that they were doing their rover work in these interchanges and that they were still responding to queries from other students. Eventually and sadly, it was resolved by moving these gatherings from behind the desk to a nearby spot in the Learning Commons.

From the assumed point of view of the dominant schema of professionals and their front counter interaction with clients, these rovers were allowing their private social lives to intrude on their public

role, private behaviours that should be kept hidden from the public. However, if rovers represent a new player in the academic world—students who help other students learn—then this public enactment and display of sociality and conversation may be an important dimension of this new kind of academic work. Insofar as space is defined not simply as an objective absolute but as constituted by and constitutive of sociality through the assemblage of places, then we could say that the placement of rovers reconfigures, not just other places, but potentially the space as a whole. Instead of being construed or experienced as simply a 'study hall' or 'computer lab' space where students are left to their own devices, on the one hand, or as a space supported at the perimeter by staff support services, on the other, rovers inject a third presence and voice into the learning space, enabling a new constellation of practices to emerge.

Rovers as nodal points

A final anecdote points up this possibility: Learning Commons C rovers have recently been exploring the use of an oval table as a possible rover station, a table seating 5-6 students. One rover has begun using this table in an interesting way which suggests a more radical form of rover placement within the Learning Commons. When asked to describe this, she writes:

> It isn't really a table for science students, but I am a very pro-active student which means that I get to know a lot of students. I guess because I talk to anyone, they bring their friends over and from there, the circle widens. I place a great emphasis in my role as a rover on getting to know other students and trying to help them feel welcome. It is funny how my science table can quickly turn into a business or TAFE table depending on the movement of people in and out of lectures. Usually if I head into the library directly after lab/lecture, there are many science students who 'tag' along and so a table is formed. It is usually a bunch of students who are planning on working, and so I find that if I am also rostered on, I will leave my stuff at that table and just keep 'roving' around. Many other students from other courses that I know will also come and join us on the table. Generally though, if the table is working it helps to encourage others who pop over to go to the computers and start working as well. Otherwise, if it is general chit-chat it means that many students get to know one another from across many different courses widening out the social network for all!!!

This anecdote points to a different mode of placement with different constellation of practices for rovers, one that has moves away from the service model and more towards some sort of node-forming role in which rovers act as 'attractors' around which student social networks and communities of practice can form and crystallise.

This section has been concerned to explore the the way that socio-institutional assumptions and architectural spaces intersect and impact on the placement of teams of students assisting others in VU Learning Commons, and how this in turn shapes the roles and perceptions of roles taken on by these student rovers.