

Transforming the medical library into a welcoming learning space: a collaborative project

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Abstract

The University of Bern is expanding the training of future physicians. This significant increase in the number of medical students has led to a shortage of student study places in the medical library “Fachbereichsbibliothek Bühlplatz” (FBB) of the University Library of Bern. For this reason, during the summer of 2019, the FBB was refurbished and reopened under a new name: Bibliothek Medizin providing more library services and student study places.

Key words: libraries, medical; facility, design and construction; learning; education.

Background

Since 2018, the University of Bern Medical Faculty has increased the number of places for medical students to contribute to tackling the shortage of physicians in Switzerland. In total 600 more students will be trained by 2023. With this increase in student numbers, the position of the University of Bern as a leading centre of medical education in Switzerland will be strengthened. In addition, in 2019, the University of Bern is introducing a full-time pharmacy course to counteract the shortage of pharmacists with 150 new students. With this expansion, the Faculty of Medicine is now the largest faculty at the University of Bern and the number of students that will use library services and facilities will increase more than 20%.

The interdisciplinary library Fachbereichsbibliothek Bühlplatz (FBB) with collections in medicine, geology, biology, biochemistry and chemistry had an urgent need for additional student study spaces in order to cope with the demands of increasing numbers of medical students.

Previous FBB refurbishments had resulted in a confusing library layout – no separation of quiet zones for student study and noisy zones for conversations. Library spaces did not reflect the changing learning

styles and preferences of students so change was necessary.

This article describes the cost-saving and innovative design of the library to meet the needs of their stakeholders.

Library refurbishment

Refurbishment took place on the Library's ground and 1st floor. The removal of the unused roll rack system and the relocation of the science books to the new science library made provision for more student study places. Science books and journals had to be assessed, de-duplicated and removed. This work proved to be time and labour intensive and should not be underestimated. It started with one person 18 months before the library's refurbishment and only finished by using other library employees and volunteers.

Through the clever zoning of quiet student study places on the ground floor and group study areas and tutorial rooms on the upper floor, the noisy and quiet zones are separated. A previously locked door on the 1st floor was opened so that students coming for courses could enter by this second entry point without using the Library's main entrance.

As most people desire natural light for quiet reflection

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and study (1), the Library's rear wall now has bookshelves for the medical books (Figure 1). With room for reading between the bookshelves and the clear labelling on the top of the bookshelves with symbols from the NLM classification (Figure 2) it is a pleasure to visit the "book zone" and browse the shelves.



Fig. 1. The books shelves at the back wall (top) and natural light for quiet study places (below).



Fig. 2. Attractive symbols for the different NLM classification subjects.

Inside the main entrance the Library's anatomical models are displayed in a new glass case to increase their vis-ability for students and visitors and informing them that they are now entering a medical zone! There is a reading area for newspaper and journals and shelves for new book acquisitions.

As the demand for consumer health information increases, the public represents a distinct proportion of library users (1). Hence, our medical subject librarian curates temporary exhibitions with books on current topics such as health and nutrition and medicinal plants in medicine.

One of the Library's new facilities is the student relaxation room (Figure 3). In particular medical students spend often a long time in the library to learn and appreciate a room to take a short break, to relax, to meditate or to have a power nap. The relaxation room equipped with beanbags can be separated into smaller areas by curtains and the lights can be dimmed for a cozy effect.



Fig.3. The relaxation room can be separated into smaller areas by curtains to have individual niches.

Signage is a powerful visual tool for communication and a crucial tool component of the library user experience. However, signage can be problematic when contributing to visual noise through overload; this often leads to signage overload, library anxiety and general confusion (2). Nevertheless, by applying parts of the concept of a design-thinking process (2) the newly designed signage of the medical library gains the attention of users and guides them through the Library (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Clear signage lead the visitor through the library.

With the Library's refurbishment came a change in name – Bibliothek Medizin marking an essential conceptual change. The removal of the science books to a new building meant the new Library only served the needs of the Medical Faculty staff and students. A new name marked a new beginning for the Library's staff and students.

A collaborative project together with students

Today a library offers much more than only books. Despite the digital revolution, the library is still attractive as a place of study, information services and student study places. Students will find quiet zones for learning without any distraction (3) and as they prefer a combination of e-media and printed books for learning there is enough work space to have printed books open beside the laptop or tablet. In addition, they can meet other medical students to have discussions or to get hints from students in other study years for example on exam preparation. Further, with the increase of information the need for orientation increased. The more research is undertaken, the more publications there are, the more demanding the literature research and scientific writing becomes. Therefore, the library offers courses within the curriculum of medicine and individual consultation session for students and

researchers by a team of highly qualified information specialists and an academic writing tutor.

The library space has an important impact on learning which has to be considered in the reorganization of different libraries (1, 4-7). The library should offer spaces and services that support all types of learning (8). This was also a requirement of the University of Bern's medical students. In workshops, the learning environments were planned together with students and they could test for example the appropriate lighting for learning. Based on this collaborative working of the library team, the architects and the students - learning environments were improved with study carrels, small group working zones with various seating styles and multifunctional tutorial rooms (Figure 5). These tutorial rooms are ready for use for problem-based learning classes of the medical students, individual research consultations with the research support services team and library courses in scientific writing and literature searching.

Therefore our library offers space that support learning, research and encourage discussion between medical students and researchers.



Fig. 5. Various learning environments created together with students during workshops.

Finally – do not forget the library team and their working environment

Spaces and collections alone do not make up the library. Already in 2014 Blumenthal stated that the library of the future will be people (9). The students and researchers benefit from the library services offered by the library team. Students and library users receive immediate information at the information desk and all email enquiries are answered by the circulation desk team. The research support services team consisting of scientific information specialists and an academic writing tutor teach and consult in scientific literature searching, academic writing and in scientific publishing. Finally, the media acquisition and cataloguing team do all the background work so that students and researchers have access to databases, e-media, apps as well to the printed books and journals and that they can be retrieved easily. To perform all this challenging tasks and to have innovative ideas such as an E-Day event (10) every year (introducing first year students to library e-resources) the library team need an inspiring working environment. Therefore, all the team received height-adjustable tables to have an ergonomic working space. The team's social area has been refurbished with acoustic panels in different shapes to reduce the noise when several people are speaking together and to give the room a relaxing and creative atmosphere. A pleasant working environment for the library team influences their motivation and working methods. At first, some of the team members had difficulties in adapting to the new office design, but with time and during a team meeting discussion everyone confirmed that the new working environment motivates them to engage themselves in their library roles more than before.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, despite different uses of the library space, the Library will not lose its original meaning – namely to be a space for knowledge transfer and to offer services in information retrieval for education and research. It can achieve this by creating different learning zones for study, research and conversation and by promoting the various services and resources it offers to students and staff. Finally, it is important that the library team will find an inspiring working environment to develop new library services for the future.

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