

Reflections from a post-pandemic library

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Abstract

One of the many lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is the importance of connecting and collaborating with students and staff in and outside the library. Because of COVID, the interaction was kept at a minimum and limited to the occasional zoom-based lectures or individual instructions. After reopening our library, we experienced a dramatic drop in library visits and library use. In this reflective text, we discuss the challenges we faced as we returned to a new normal.

Key words: COVID-19; distance learning; library instruction; disruption.

Introduction

As a library at the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences (GIH), we provide service to faculty and around 1400 students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate degree programs preparing for the teaching profession in Physical Education as well as for careers in Sports Coaching, Sport Management or Preventive Health. Before the pandemic, students were used to having their classes on campus and in-person learning. The library, centrally located on campus, was frequently used by students for lending books, studying or recreation. The small and intimate campus creates many informal encounters where students recognize you, chat for a while and then ask for support. During COVID, this all disappeared overnight.

In March 2020, COVID forced us to close our campus and turn to remote work and teaching. We could benefit from having many of our resources, such as databases and journal articles, already accessible online. Throughout COVID, we tried to maintain outreach and engagement with students. We offered drop-in support via zoom and marketed recurrent 15-minute online events to make library services visible to students. Looking back, the transition to a fully digital library with online support and instruction via zoom went better than anticipated.

Reopening the GIH library in a post-pandemic year

During the spring semester of 2022, teaching gradually returned to campus-based education, albeit activity on campus remained low. Our library returned to pre-pandemic opening hours, but it was estimated that campus life would return to normal in September. During spring, information literacy training was held in a hybrid form to maximize student availability on and off campus. From the start of the fall semester, all teaching at GIH was instructed to be held on campus, and we switched back to strictly campus-based training sessions. To maintain a digital presence, we continued to host our recurring online events in zoom and marketed these on campus and via our digital channels. Throughout both semesters, individual instructions were offered on campus or digitally via zoom, depending on the student's preferences.

Still, despite seeing our old students returning to campus and introducing the library to our new students, our library has echoed empty, and the number of questions at the information desk remained at a minimum. By November, we confirmed a 50% decrease in library visits and a 30% decrease in loans but an increase in website traffic (comparing data between the 1st of September to the 15th of November 2019 and 2022).

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We began our inquiries among teachers during informal meetings with faculty members. Most teachers agreed that fewer students were on campus. There had been no cuts in teaching hours, but some teachers used flipped learning and added pre-recorded lectures with longer seminars. The number of classes held on campus had therefore been reduced. Even though teachers encouraged their students to come to campus, they could accept zoom-based sessions for students with long-distance commuting.

Discussion

Meeting students where they are is a challenge for libraries on any given day, but not meeting our students for over two years has highlighted how susceptible we are to changes. Martzoukou argues that despite the numerous challenges COVID created, it can be seen as a catalyst for change and resifting of priorities. For academic librarians involved in information literacy training, a renewed mission is emerging, addressing access and connectivity to resources, designing for online education, and fostering the development of digital literacy (1).

Even though our transition to a fully digital library during COVID went well, we realize that our digital presence could be more robust. Singh et al. highlight the complexity of creating online instructions. Engaging learning environments need to be planned and designed carefully. As a result of the pandemic and the rapid transition to a new form of teaching, there wasn't enough time or knowledge to incorporate elements of online educational pedagogies. This resulted in students and educators reporting a lack of sense of community and a lack of student motivation (2).

We agree that we lost the sense of community with students because of the sudden shift from face-to-face to remote library teaching. Although library teaching continued online, the lack of instant feedback made the social elements of our profession clear. Ahlfeld writes that the physical space of a library is challenging to recreate virtually, as users depend on these spaces more than we might have previously believed (3). To us, this might have led to a lack of awareness among students of the full potential of library services and support provided. A prolonged interruption to campus

service may have challenged the traditional views of library services based on physical material and face-to-face interactions.

Also, from experience, we know that many students who enrol at GIH have their first encounters with an academic library. Students who enrolled at GIH during COVID had their first encounters online. As Scoulas write, the first year of college is vital to students' academic success and well-being, The pandemic altered the expected social interactions that would typically occur on campus and made navigating physical places more challenging (4). We believe first-year students with little experience visiting the physical library during the pandemic have more difficulty familiarising themselves with the library and lack a sense of belonging.

The educational settings have changed as teachers have shifted to a more hybrid way of teaching. These changes have probably impacted where students study and their space use. After the pandemic, students are not used to being on campus all day and want more flexible study methods. Could this be an answer to a decrease in library visits? The changes in students' behavioral patterns leave us uncertain about how to proceed with some of our pre-COVID plans, such as redesigning the library's physical space.

The importance of embedded libraries has been known for some time (5). It is an option to increase our outreach activities towards students. We need to promote our services and reexamine our students' needs. The pandemic has made us aware of the importance of interacting face-to-face, but also the importance of well-functioning online support. We need to strive towards a more flexible library which is accessible to all students with their different needs. Thus, stepping backwards into a pre-pandemic library is not an option.

Conclusions

Opening the post-pandemic library has been challenging, but we feel encouraged to investigate new ways to increase the activity in our library. As a small library, we're more sensitive to changes in our surroundings, such as the ones created by COVID and the post-pandemic changes to educational practices. However, one

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of the benefits of being small is that it is easy to test and use the knowledge gained from learning experiences such as COVID.

We are still unsure whether the library usage change is a temporary dip or a permanent state. Further investigation is needed regarding our student's changed library patterns and whether it remains over time. We need to integrate embedded librarianship into students' user communities to understand student needs better and provide prompt support. Then we can start planning to re-design our library services, regardless of whether these are in our physical library or online. Most of all, we look forward to providing a user-oriented library where digital and hybrid spaces coexist.

*Submitted on invitation.
Accepted on 12 December 2022.*

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