

Partnership

Canadian journal of library and information practice and research

Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

PARTNERSHIP

The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research
Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

Conveying Complexity in Contemporary Academic Library Service Models

Communiquer la complexité dans les modèles de service des bibliothèques universitaires contemporaines

Barbara Sobol

Volume 15, Number 1, 2020

Special issue on Canadian library associations

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070705ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i1.5777>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Partnership: The Provincial and Territorial Library Associations of Canada

ISSN

1911-9593 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Sobol, B. (2020). Conveying Complexity in Contemporary Academic Library Service Models. *Partnership*, 15(1), 1–21.

<https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i1.5777>

Article abstract

This article will provide both practical and critical insights into contemporary library service practices using the UBC Okanagan service model redesign as a case study. In 2018 the service desk at UBC Okanagan Library was redesigned into a service zone with a fundamental goal of increasing the prominence of complex library services. By improving the visibility of research support within a newly conceptualized service zone, we addressed inclusivity through design and staffing practices while facilitating campus engagement through programming. This article offers a contribution to the ongoing discussion of consolidated service models and challenges the profession to continue experimenting with service model design and delivery in order to support diverse library patrons in an increasingly neoliberal university environment.

© Barbara Sobol, 2020



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

PARTNERSHIP

The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research
Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

vol. 15, no. 1 (2020)
Innovations in Practice (peer-reviewed)
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i1.5777>
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Conveying Complexity in Contemporary Academic Library Service Models

Barbara Sobol
UBC Okanagan
barbara.sobol@ubc.ca

Abstract

This article will provide both practical and critical insights into contemporary library service practices using the UBC Okanagan service model redesign as a case study. In 2018 the service desk at UBC Okanagan Library was redesigned into a service zone with a fundamental goal of increasing the prominence of complex library services. By improving the visibility of research support within a newly conceptualized service zone, we addressed inclusivity through design and staffing practices while facilitating campus engagement through programming. This article offers a contribution to the ongoing discussion of consolidated service models and challenges the profession to continue experimenting with service model design and delivery in order to support diverse library patrons in an increasingly neoliberal university environment.

Keywords

Service desk design; reference; circulation; academic library; neoliberalism

Introduction

For front-line academic library services to remain relevant and valued by library patrons and university administrators, a new conceptual framework for front-line service is required. Academic libraries operate within a university structure that is increasingly utilizing corporate management practices, which are in turn informed by neoliberal ideology (Buschman, 2015, 2017; Côté and Allahar, 2011; Nicholson, 2015). Simultaneously, libraries are rooted in democratic values of equitable access to education, freedom of expression, and the importance of public goods to civil society

(Budd, 2008). By examining front-line library services, especially consolidated service desks, in the context of contemporary university conditions, this article will explore the need for a reconceptualization of front-line library work. Utilizing a renovation at UBC Okanagan Library in 2018 as a case study, an argument will be articulated for the profession to reconsider how front-line services are designed, staffed, and conveyed to stakeholders, while acknowledging a growing tension in libraries to meet corporate objectives and concomitantly upholding professional values.

Librarians have a professional obligation to our patrons and administrators to purposefully create spaces and services that concurrently support individuals and institutional mandates. Library patrons are a diverse group, wearing the various labels of students, international students, graduate students, faculty, staff, and community members. Moreover, these people have a multitude of identities, income-levels, sexual orientations, religions, genders, ages, political beliefs, global/local origins, races, abilities, and statuses as parents, children, and spouses. When considering the creation of front-line spaces and services, academic librarians need to navigate changing pathways between institutional requirements and support for individual patrons. The skills and expertise that library professionals bring to academic research are recognized as immensely valuable and yet difficult to quantify (Dickerson, 2016). How academic libraries decide to provide and represent front-line services conveys to patrons and administrators the underlying values of the profession.

Academic library service models exist within social and historical contexts. In order to explore the case study examined in this article, a contextual framing is required. A context section covers topics specific to academic libraries as well as broader themes in post-secondary education. Building on this contextualization, an extensive literature review section covers the interrelated topics of: consolidated service desks; the visibility of library services; service spaces as teaching spaces; best practices in space design; staffing models; assessment practices; critical perspectives on reference as a public good; and, neoliberalism. Throughout this article, service desks are understood as primary locations for core services to patrons, including at a minimum, circulation and reference services. The phrase consolidated desk is used as shorthand for an array of configurations in which these core services are co-located into a single or cohesive desk structure. A service model represents the overarching approach to desk structure, staffing, the range of services provided, and the approach to customer service. Finally, the concept of a service zone is introduced, encapsulating not only the desk, but adjacent spaces and/or services; it represents an expansion beyond the physical desk as the primary location for service. A case study of a service model redesign at UBC Okanagan Library will be presented with focused attention on renovation details, collaboration elements, and assessment. The case study will then be evaluated in a critical analysis section. In the conclusion this article will pose questions and offer analysis regarding current and future library service models.

Context

A service desk remains the most visible aspect of academic library services, aside from the website, and despite growth in the areas of outreach and information literacy

instruction (Johnson, 2018). Historically, front-line library service desks have been built around discrete categories of circulation and reference, although additional services like technology help are often provided. Front-line work is necessarily connected to other functional aspects of library work. However, distinct job descriptions and departmental divisions have often created silos between these functional tasks (Hoppe & Jung, 2017). Despite the common misconception that all library workers are librarians, the work of circulation and reference has traditionally been divided along strict lines of professional credentials. This misperception of library roles contributes to a general lack of understanding regarding the scope and complexity of library work. While specific models of reference work have shifted over the past twenty years, the basic services on offer and the design of the service space has barely changed (Weber & Bowron, 2019). There is always a desk, just positioned, sized, and staffed slightly differently. By reconceptualizing front-line work into the categories of transactional and complex, we can gain insight into how to design and deliver a range of library services that take advantage of the most visible mechanism of communication available to us—the service desk.

In this article the phrase *front-line services* will be used to refer to both circulation and reference services and is meant to encompass the bulk of visible activity at a library service desk. Complex and transactional work need not be binary or mutually exclusive categories, although most front-line work can be divided in this manner. Transactional tasks can be delivered easily: there is a correct answer to a patron's question and a most effective way for the library to deliver on it. Complex tasks are layered, take time, require expertise, and may be successfully resolved through multiple different pathways. While many reference questions are understood as complex by definition, other front-line services such as circulation tasks involving patron accounts, technical problem solving, and systems issues also require in-depth knowledge and should also be recognized as complex. Further, many reference questions are straightforward to answer and should be characterized as transactional. In order to demonstrate the ongoing value of this full scope of front-line library services delivered by library employees, we need to take a holistic approach in conveying service options to patrons and administrators. Beginning with the premise that the work conducted at the main service point in a library conveys to patrons and administrators the range of services on offer as well as the underlying value and importance of those services, we gain new perspectives into the ways that we design, staff, and communicate front-line services. A service model that showcases the complex nature of the work conducted by library professionals and decreases the design focus and staff time spent on transactional activities was a fundamental goal of the redesign process at UBC Okanagan Library.

In many libraries there is pressure to consolidate service points to a single location (Hockey, 2016). A consolidated service desk provides a clear location for interaction in a library, but the potential scope of that interaction has not been given sufficient consideration by libraries when considering service model design. These conditions have been created through many contributing factors: a decline in print circulation and reference questions; the evolution of librarian roles; and a customer service ethic that leads to a desire to improve the patron experience (Alexander & Wakimoto, 2019; Hockey, 2016). These conditions can also be understood as corresponding to a

widespread adoption of neoliberal ideology within public institutions (Steger & Roy, 2010). Johnson (2018) clearly outlines the challenges of the visibility of librarian work as roles evolve away from a traditional reference librarian job description. Of concern is not just the visibility of librarian work, but of the prominence of complex work offered to a campus by the academic library as a whole.

Academic libraries currently employ a range of service models, although these are increasingly presented in the form of a consolidated service desk. Alexander and Wakimoto (2019) detail changes to the traditional model of discrete circulation and reference desks with the following alternatives for reference currently in use: roaming reference; virtual reference; paraprofessional staff providing reference and circulation at a desk with discrete stations for each; paraprofessional staff providing reference and circulation tasks interchangeably; and finally, peer reference. In many of these variations, librarians are available for consultations through an on-demand or appointment process. Locating a wide range of transactional and complex activities in the same place creates a unique social environment. A consolidated desk requires patrons to engage with checkout tasks at the same time and place as consultative, collaborative, and learning activities. An analogy may be helpful (Sobol, 2019): imagine you are in the checkout line at your grocery store with a cart full of groceries. Would it ever occur to you to ask the cashier for nutritional advice? If this was a new service, would you expect the nutritional consultation to take place while paying for your groceries? Should other people in line re-route to the next available cashier or listen to your personalized nutritional advice? A consolidated desk as the location of transactional activities and as the entry point for reference requires people to engage in exactly this unusual mix of behaviours.

While front-line library services have remained relatively static, there is a professional recognition that change and experimentation are valuable activities (Weber & Bowron, 2019). The impetus to reconceptualize front-line service dovetails with recent trends to focus librarian expertise and time on information literacy and outreach activities (Johnson, 2018). Information literacy and outreach hold promise for supporting library patrons in their learning and research and are a clear demonstration of the value that a contemporary academic library contributes to a campus (Aguilar, Keating, Schadl & Van Reenen, 2011). Yet these activities are not as visible as the service desk, which represents what the library has to offer during every hour the doors are open. A consolidated service desk that portrays transactional activities as the main set of services on offer threatens to undermine the broader contributions that academic libraries can make to diverse individual patrons and to the campus. By simultaneously considering desk space design, staffing models, and broader changes in information seeking behaviour as well as shifting priorities in librarian work, we begin to see a new framework emerge. This framework places consolidated service desks as a central feature in maintaining in-person library services to patrons and in demonstrating the value of a library in an increasingly corporate university environment.

We need to consider that by continuing to design desks primarily for convenience and efficiency, which are hallmark neoliberal values, we run the risk of oversimplifying the complex role of academic libraries in supporting academic research. By reimagining

front-line services and by designing service spaces differently, we can better articulate the range of services that we provide to patrons in support of professional library values. And, we can better represent the activities that add 'value' to the campus, the precise criteria which administrators increasingly require. In discussing the tension between neoliberal values in post-secondary education and academic libraries as public goods, Nicholson (2015) articulates the challenge as such: "we need to frame our critiques of neoliberalism in higher education in a manner that acknowledges the socioeconomic and political realities of our campuses and lobbies for change *at the same time*" (332, emphasis in original). By imagining front-line service holistically rather than by internal library categories, we can begin to improve the inclusivity of our service spaces and staffing practices. We can prioritize and communicate library values as tied to a patron's basic and complex needs as central to the service model itself.

Literature Review

There is value in bringing together a wide breadth of literature to the topic of front-line services. That value resides in the need to develop a professional framework in which to compare and evaluate case studies in academic libraries. While local contexts are important, so too are broad social conditions impacting academic libraries. This is a challenging task due to the inherently interdisciplinary nature of librarianship. A lack of a shared theoretical foundation within our profession, which is a common feature of other disciplines, needs to be overcome in order to articulate professional values through the research literature as we examine and advance our professional practices.

Interdisciplinary perspectives which examine public goods, public spaces, and post-secondary education have relevance to reimagining academic library service models. For example, both Mattern (2014) and Klinenberg (2018) make arguments for the value of public libraries as social infrastructure. Academic librarians can apply interdisciplinary insights to reframe and reconsider our collective understanding of spaces, services, and interactions with patrons.

The literature on academic library service models is extensive. Weber and Bowron (2019) nicely chart the origins and evolution of the reference desk as a service model, noting minimal change since the nineteenth century. And yet, for the changes that have occurred with consolidating circulation and reference desks, a robust professional debate about these changes is strong enough to be characterized as divisive (Pierce & Schilling, 2019). However, from a patron perspective, especially a person walking into an academic library for the first time, the experience of engaging with library employees is remarkably similar to what it has been historically (Hoppe and Jung, 2017). Libraries do a great deal of work behind the scenes relating to collections, systems and an increasing array of support services designed to branch directly into various university-wide functions and departments (Si, Zeng, Guo, & Zhuang, 2019). With changing patron and administrative expectations of a contemporary academic library, the duties and priorities of library employees are in a time of flux (Johnson, 2018). In the context of all of these compounding factors, rethinking our understanding of front-line services is a timely topic.

The literature on revised service models can easily generate a reference list 100 sources strong, yet one is challenged to make informed decisions based on it. By surveying all libraries in the California State University system, Alexander and Wakimoto (2019) make a significant contribution to moving this discourse forward. A continuum of practice emerges from distinct circulation and reference desks to many versions of consolidated service. This range of models is described within the context of generally declining reference statistics and limited rigorous assessment. Of key importance is that this discourse, which is understandably focused on case studies, is lacking in conceptual framing of the broader work of library services in the context of changing university social conditions in the direction of corporatization.

By describing how reference services embody an ethic of care, Hoppe and Jung (2017) articulate the feeling of vulnerability inherent in asking for help. These authors examine the academic library as a social structure that can either reinforce hierarchy and privilege or seek to challenge social constructions, leading to a more equitable society. Further, they argue that by including non-dominant perspectives through materials collected, art displayed, signs posted, and staff hired, the library profession can challenge existing power structures. For Hoppe and Jung (2017), a space open to all, not tied to perceptions of expertise hidden behind a big desk or limited to appointment booking, is most likely to lead to an inclusive environment set to foster critical inquiry. By combining these insights with those offered by Daniel (2013), who found that patrons are more likely to approach a desk in which they see themselves represented, we can begin to understand how to intentionally create inclusive service models.

Dickerson (2016) takes a unique approach to considering the future of reference services in the context of a proposed renovation at a small academic library by utilizing the idea of beta spaces. By craftily integrating the work of reference to the strategic documents of her institution, Dickerson fostered a new understanding of reference space as tied to the broader goals of an instruction program. Beta spaces are defined as

user-oriented environments with a focus on innovation and experimentation, much like a makerspace but with an emphasis on ideas over technology. A beta space for reference services would enhance opportunities for active learning, help make the research process visible and tangible, and effectively demonstrate the value of reference (Dickerson, 2016, [Abstract]).

Dickerson (2016) argues for a need to focus our professional attention on the visibility of reference services in order to influence our patrons:

There is an uncomfortable tension between the stated value of reference services in library mission statements and the threat to the visible presence of these services in the physical environment through a dispersal of services or a limitation of services behind a static desk (para. 13).

Dickerson convincingly argues that we can create more permeable lines between faculty offices, classrooms, library service spaces, learning commons, and galleries as a way to improve library services for patrons.

By considering library service space as teaching space, we gain new perspectives on physical design. Drawing on the work of Kalinec-Craig (2017), who asserts that students have a right to be confused in education, Talbert (2018) argues that an ideal teaching space is one that makes students rethink their expectations. According to Talbert (2018), a traditionally designed classroom affords a professor a disproportionate amount of space at the front of the classroom which conveys an inequity of power and authority in relation to the students. Talbert notes that student space is crowded by comparison and that standard desk and chair furniture also influences the expected activities of students: to sit, write, and listen. Thus, the standard classroom design conveys more than where to locate oneself but also the power dynamics of the space and the roles of those in it, reinforcing predetermined roles and inequities. Positive confusion is created when the space requires individuals to pause for a moment, however unconsciously, to consider what is expected or possible within a space. Pierce and Schilling (2019) make a similar argument regarding the design impact of library spaces on patron behaviour and perception with a specific focus on service desks. The Inquiry Lab model at UCLA provides a practical example of how to create a series of spaces around reference without the traditional focus on a service desk (UCLA, 2018). Prentice and Argyropoulos (2018) provide an important contribution to assessing library space usage by detailing a study in observational space utilization.

Best practices for contemporary service delivery have not been established, with the literature divided on many key points related to staffing, physical design, and inclusivity. As library professionals we are aware that the complexity of researching some topics has increased in the digital environment (Warisee Sosulski & Tyckoson, 2018). Buss (2016) argues that the only reasonable approach for reference services is to continue to evolve as the need for our services will remain vital for some forms of inquiry. The critical information literacy discourse pertains directly to reference services by encouraging diverse perspectives and analysis of established traditions (Accardi, 2017; Clark, 2016). By conceptualizing front-line service as fundamentally tied to information literacy instruction and inclusivity values, many existing practices of dividing tasks along internal library divisions and desk design norms are called into question.

The interrelated topics of staffing, change management, customer service, and service desk consolidation contribute to a growing body of literature relevant to analyzing service models (Bunnett et al., 2016; Burnette, 2017; Chauvet, Bourbous, & Liston, 2016; Everall & Logan, 2017; Gardner, Napier, & Carpenter, 2013; Skellen & Kyrychenko, 2016; Venner & Keshmiripour, 2016). Also important is a series of articles examining peer-reference as an emerging practice (Hogan & Conlin, 2019; Faix, 2014; Bodemer, 2014; Faix et al., 2010). Assessment is critical to establishing best practices, and there are many quantitative (Bowron & Weber, 2017; Escobar, Gauder & Rice, 2012; Krieb, 2018) and qualitative studies (Rogers & Carrier, 2017; Mohess, 2016) to draw upon. Lilburn (2017) addresses the complexity of assessing library practices within a post-secondary culture of neoliberal measures of success. When considering a

renovation or redesign, each of these articles offers important insights into theoretical and practical considerations for contemporary service delivery.

Neoliberalism can be understood as an ideology, a governmentality and a discrete set of public policies (Steger & Roy, 2010). While all definitions are applicable in analyzing academic libraries, the concept of governmentality is particularly useful when examining front-line library services. By governmentality, we mean

modes of governance based on particular premises, logics and power relations. A neoliberal governmentality is rooted in entrepreneurial values such as competitiveness, self-interest, and decentralization...Rather than operating along more traditional lines of pursuing the public good (rather than profits) by enhancing civil society and social justice, neoliberals call for the employment of governmental technologies that are taken from the world of business and commerce (Steger & Roy, 2010, 12).

Côté and Allahar (2011) provide a comprehensive sociological evaluation of corporate trends in Canadian universities, and while they do not specifically address libraries, the impacts of neoliberalism within academic libraries is well articulated by Budd (2008) and Buschman (2017).

Under neoliberalism, the idea of the university as a public good devoted to critical social analysis, civic education, and meaningful scholarship is replaced with a utilitarian and market-driven approach to higher education characterized by flexible and efficient program delivery designed to produce an employable workforce and commercially relevant research (Lilburn, 2017, 93).

Nicholson (2015) describes neoliberal values as so entrenched in contemporary library management practices that they are almost invisible due to their pervasiveness. Analyzing front-line service through a lens of neoliberal governmentality helps to surface tensions between professional library values and business practices that have been adopted by libraries. It also allows us to concurrently consider shifting patterns in librarian work from a perspective of ideological intent rather than as a logical reaction to changing patron information seeking behaviour and new technologies (Hockey, 2016). In combination, these viewpoints allow us to analyze longstanding practices and assumptions from a fresh perspective.

Case Study: UBC Okanagan Library Service Zone

At UBC Okanagan Library, we have developed a service model that builds on innovative ideas from the academic literature and suits the culture and environment of our campus. A collaborative decision-making process was key to our insights and the overall positive outcomes of this approach (Sobol & Buschert, 2019). By broadly consulting the literature and relying on various theoretical insights, we chose to design a service zone that has a consolidated service desk as its anchor while prioritizing complex scholarly support over a one-stop-shop approach and concomitant set of

values. We developed a series of objectives against which all design elements were considered:

- Provide a welcoming space to encourage student questions
- Increase visibility of “hidden” library services, such as individual or group research consultations
- Increase engagement with the campus through programming
- Improve workspace for staff through ergonomic design and sightlines to existing and new library entrances
- Increase collaboration between library colleagues by improving flow of referrals through thoughtful design and processes
- Improve self-serve options for routine transactional services

In 2016, a welcome announcement was made that an additional library building, now known as The Commons, would be built. As a consequence, our existing library would require a second entrance to join the buildings, precipitating a renovation of the library first floor in the summer of 2018. A previous renovation in 2012 (see *Figure 1*) had created a consolidated desk offering circulation, reference services, and technology assistance. Thus, we had already reconfigured job descriptions, developed a referral model for reference, created an ongoing-staff training program, and fostered functioning teams. The 2012 desk was a giant, U-shaped structure, at bar height. It was seen as imposing by students and an ergonomic nightmare by staff. Starting in 2016, we developed a collaborative process involving all employee groups, student consultation, and significant research into best practices to inform our service redesign (Sobol & Buschert, 2019). The result was a revised service model that expanded previous categories of circulation and reference beyond a desk structure to a service zone tied to teaching and engagement activities.

The UBC Okanagan campus has seen exponential growth since it was established in 2005 as part of the University of British Columbia and on the former site of Okanagan University College. The UBC Okanagan campus is a research university with over 10,000 students registered for the 2019/2020 academic year (UBC Okanagan Campus, 2018). A total of 62 undergraduate programs and 19 graduate programs are offered. The student population is comprised of 15% international students representing 102 countries, 5.7% self-identified Aboriginal students, 9.5% graduate students, and an on-campus residence population of 17%. The service zone described in this article is located on the main floor of the original library building. Collections stacks are located on a second floor and the majority of the new building space is designed for collaborative student study space. As the library service zone is visible from both entrances to the library building, we have not implemented any permanent signage to define the service zone. Our goal is to have the activities in the space communicate the services on offer.



Figure 1. Old Service Desk (2012–2018)

During the summer of 2018, we renovated the first floor of our library with a holistic understanding of the multiple uses of an academic library as important public space for our campus (Sobol & Buschert, 2018). In addition to the service zone, which is the focus of this article, we utilized the renovation opportunity to complete the following physical changes:

- Redesign of our teaching lab to become an active learning classroom
- Purchase of new furnishings with an emphasis on a variety of heights and types, and inclusion of power outlets
- Addition of a local public library branch within our space
- Conversion of an existing women's washroom into two gender-neutral and accessible washrooms
- Redistribution of some computers from our busy first floor to quiet study areas
- Relocation of serials stacks and DVDs to increase student study space
- Creation of a programming room

The comprehensive approach taken in this renovation reflects an underlying conceptual understanding of front-line services as fundamentally integrated with other library work, which is often hidden from public view. The aesthetic continuity of the service desk with our teaching classroom, programming room and consultation areas allow us to present patrons with a broad picture of what an academic library can offer as a unique public space and a location for completing specific tasks.

Our collaborative team knew from experience that students often became aware of services only after witnessing them occur at our desk. We wanted to create a space that would encourage the use of complex scholarly support while decreasing the focus on transactional activities. As such, a series of transactional tasks were identified as having

potential for self-service. We added an office supply vending machine to our lobby, we purchased a cell phone charging station, and we relocated and promoted an existing self-checkout machine. While self-service can be characterized as an implementation of neoliberal practices (Nicholson, 2015), we chose to utilize these practices to reposition the work of the desk so that the complex services on offer would become more prominent. This decision exemplifies the tension academic librarians are faced with when adherence to corporate measures of success and budgetary decision-making are expected and professional values still hold currency. We recognize that there are inclusivity limitations of self-service options for some patrons and that all library services can benefit from human mediation at times. Staff discretion at the service desk allows for individualized attention to patron needs, which ensures our inclusivity and privacy principles are not compromised.

The physical design of our service zone focused on simultaneously meeting many of our objectives. We created a flexible and height-adjustable desk structure with sightlines to both entrances, improved ergonomics, and dimmable lighting. Through this multi-faceted service zone, we provide three front desks (see Figure 2). Two of the desks are staffed by library services assistants, positions which required a library technician diploma or equivalent, from which we offer circulation and reference services. The third desk is staffed by a student employee who provides peer technology assistance and generates displays and programs each term. The layout of the desk space and mix of employees standing and sitting fosters a relaxed and flexible environment in which all employees regularly collaborate to assist individual patrons. Student positions are limited in scope to technology help, but students are intentionally given the same prominence at our desk as the literature is clear that people are more likely to engage with customer service when they see themselves represented (Daniel, 2013).



Figure 2. New Service Zone

Improving the visibility of teaching activities in our service zone was of paramount importance. To meet this objective, we added two consultation tables behind the three front desks. Each table seats five people, one has a computer, and one has just a monitor with cables. These tables are used by on-call librarians to provide complex reference help in a high-visibility area. Students utilize these tables for studying when

they are not needed for library services. Our referral model relies on library service assistants to triage all questions and refer as appropriate to a librarian. Librarians are on call from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekdays. When librarians are not scheduled on-call, an online form is used to connect the patron with their subject librarian, placing the responsibility for follow up with the librarian rather than the student.

This consultation area extends around one side of the desk zone with an eight-seat table equipped with a large TV screen as well as whiteboards on wheels. This larger space is used for small scale instruction and group consultation. Again, our intent is to make as visible as possible the information literacy support that we contribute to the campus. Moveable whiteboards allow us to create privacy, and the availability of a range of technology facilitates the use of institutional or student-owned equipment as needed. This small instruction area also includes three research consultation computers. Building on our objective of improving campus engagement through programming, we also invite campus partners to book this space for pop-up programs and to showcase events. Recent examples of campus partners include the Student Learning Hub, Health and Wellness department, Co-op Office, and Equity & Inclusion Office.

Our design is porous and open, removing the typical division of space between patrons and staff and concomitantly reducing the hierarchies and power structures that those divisions reinforce (Hoppe & Jung, 2017; Talbert, 2018). This environment also increases the opportunity for collaborative approaches to all library activities, from library account queries to reference questions. Beyond working together on reference questions with patrons, we wanted to generate interactions that would lead to conversation and enquiry. We are purposefully creating a busy environment that generates interest and conveys a multiplicity of perspectives in order to improve inclusivity. The interrelatedness of reference and instruction is well understood within the profession, but to view the desk and in-class instruction as but two spokes in a broader wheel of support, all connected to the same guiding principles, is useful when creating related programming and designing collaborative spaces (Dickerson, 2016). When planning the UBC Okanagan Library renovation, we took Dickerson's insights regarding a reference desk a step further and applied them to a consolidated desk. Based largely on those insights, we have created a service zone that includes our desk area but also extends throughout the first floor of the library, with interactive displays, a programming room, and a collaborative teaching lab all visually tied together through furniture, paint colour, and artwork.

Collaboration and Assessment

To address our objective of improving inclusivity and fostering a welcoming space, we piloted and then formalized library programming by student employees. Our peer-technology assistant positions were expanded to include a responsibility for delivering one program per term. This initiative promotes student perspectives and insights into library-related themes and makes the space appear heterogeneous, fostering an environment where diverse types of questions and engagement are constantly visible. Student-led programs have included exam stress-busting activities, free tea giveaways,

book displays based on course-content or library themes, magnetic poetry boards, interactive question and answer whiteboards, and contests. Student-led programs contribute to the flexible and welcoming dynamic in the service zone allowing different students to see themselves and their ideas reflected in the offerings over time. In contrast to articles advocating for peer reference as a means of fostering inclusivity in a service model, we have found programming to be an effective means to meet this goal.

Two additional innovative spaces were completed as part of our renovation. An existing library computer lab was converted into an active learning classroom designed to support collaborative learning (see *Figure 3*). The room includes four tables with screens linked to the instructor control panel to allow for sharing views among tables. Renovating our teaching space was led by my colleague, Sajni Lacey, and was accompanied by a new information literacy curriculum. We also created a new programming room, which has a large glass wall on one side allowing for high visibility of events. This room provides us with a venue to showcase library events, hold small workshops, and again invite campus partners to present programs open to the entire campus. These two innovative spaces contribute substantially to our objective of increasing engagement through programming as the design of both sets a tone of collaboration rather than passive attendance.



Figure 3. Active Learning Information Literacy Classroom

Assessment of the UBC Okanagan Library service model is nascent, and plans for a robust assessment program are in development. How can the visibility of services to patrons be measured? How can we gain insight into the perception of services from campus administrators and patrons who do not visit the space? These questions are not easily answered. In early 2019, UBC Library conducted a newly designed, system-wide survey to replace LibQual+®. Data from the *UBC Library Survey* shows satisfaction levels with in-person help, reference consultations and borrowing services to be 96% in the Okanagan Library. Longitudinal data will be key to interpreting these numbers. Engagement with student-led programming, and usage of the spaces designed to facilitate campus events and pop-ups have exceeded our expectations. Student-led programs such as contests and interactive displays often reach 200 students or more. Campus demand for our interactive spaces is growing, and we have received consistently positive feedback from other campus departments on the visibility of the

space as a driver of event success. However, a nuanced understanding of the value of our service model to the campus has not yet been established. Assessment beyond quantitative numbers to incorporate qualitative approaches such as those used by Mohess (2017) as well as Rogers and Carrier (2017) will inform future evaluations.

Positioning complex work as the focus of the service zone remains a work in progress. Reference statistics for the 2018/19 academic year were comparable to the previous year. Reference questions are now tracked in categories that can be told as a story tied to university objectives: access, course readings/reserves, search strategies, and, citation support. Developing measures that capture the activities we want to promote remains a challenge. Referral processes between employee groups are strong and have increased since our service redesign was implemented. However, we see dramatic swings in reference activity based on factors that are often out of our control such as the type of assignments given in introductory courses and the amount of information literacy instruction conducted in a term. We are intentionally tracking consultations held in the service zone, as well as specific types of reference questions, with the hope of being able to draw future connections between our service model and levels of service activity.

Critical Analysis

The UBC Okanagan Library's service zone represents an improvement, but it is not an end point in service model design. Drawing inspiration from the concept of beta spaces in libraries (Dickerson, 2016) and the Inquiry Lab model at UCLA (UCLA Library, 2018), we have created a zone of activity that conveys complexity while also improving inclusivity. Campus conditions vary considerably, and I am not proposing a single solution for front-line service. While the traditional approach of discrete reference and circulation desks represented a professional standard for design and service, there is not enough experimentation or assessment of recent variations to warrant widespread adoption of a single solution. A new set of standard practices for service delivery and space design are required.

The physical design and service model now in place at UBC Okanagan Library is different than it was, but perhaps not different enough. Internally, the redesign has met the objectives set forth. Demonstrating the value of our redesign through formal assessment is in development. However, such assessment holds inherent challenges. It is difficult if not impossible to quantify the value of individualized library support (Hoppe and Jung, 2017). Further, by viewing complex research activities through an assessment lens, we must be careful not to reinforce neoliberal values. "University campuses . . . do not lend themselves quite so easily to quality considerations and their measurements, for scholarship and learning do not always have clear quantifiable ends in mind" (Côté and Allahar, 2011, 18). A balance must be found between professional judgement, formal measures of assessment, and the criteria required within an institution to allocate resources.

Collaboration is a defining element of service model at UBC Okanagan Library. The design itself is intended to counter traditional expectations of academic library services.

By adopting the spirit of beta space (Dickerson, 2016), collaboration is now the focal point of activities in the service zone. A library patron is not a customer by virtue of the design, but rather is situated as an equal participant in any interaction. In addition to the revised physical design, this shift has been achieved through training staff how to engage with questions and refer appropriately. A notable feature of our space is that it does not always look the same. We have expectations that consistent service will be delivered, but the physical space changes dramatically each day. With furniture and technology that are intentionally flexible, accessible and inviting, the space is often full of students studying. Some are at the consultation tables engaged in a group consultation with a librarian while others are studying independently within the service zone. We were committed to maintaining a merged service model, but we needed to find creative ways to better meet the transactional and complex needs of patrons to support their scholarship.

Despite our efforts at UBC Okanagan Library, the revised model still conveys the transactional activities more clearly than the complex ones. There is still an obvious place to line up, a sure sign of a transactional space. Further, the reality is that many of the patrons in our library do need in-person assistance with many transactional activities comprising both circulation and reference tasks. One of the biggest challenges we face is that while circulation activity in our library has decreased significantly over the past ten years, it is still an important aspect of our overall set of library services. While ebook usage is greater than print circulation, we do still circulate many print items. Further, as technology loans comprise a third of all circulation activities in our library, the prominence of these activities remains strong. The continued volume of transactional activity is challenging because certain desk design considerations are required to support circulation, but also because the quantitative measurement of circulation tends to imply a comparable metric for reference. And yet, as argued throughout this paper, the transactional and complex services provided in a library are inherently different types of tasks. The cost of automating some activities is prohibitive, and technologically delivered services are rarely inclusive for all: such is the case with options we did not implement, including automated circulation by RFID and laptop lending machines.

Convenience and one-stop shopping is often held up as quality customer service within libraries (Hockey, 2016). This sentiment can be true, while paradoxically also conveying an ideological influence of the neoliberal values of efficiency and individual choice, which can come at the expense of understanding research as a critical activity that is both time-intensive and socially constructed (Budd, 2008). The UBC Okanagan Library redesign provides a practical example of how to implement a complex theoretical understanding of contemporary library services. Rather than passively adopting the one-stop-shop approach, we have chosen to reposition front-line services with a focus on scholarly activity. This important contribution that we make to our diverse patrons and to our campus is situated in the critical realm of the academic pursuit, a place for developing questions and seeking answers. Understanding the tensions inherent in the types of work that we perform within libraries is critical in finding creative solutions for future service models that utilize and showcase the skills and expertise of library professionals.

An examination of alternate models of front-line service will reinforce the need for a new conceptual understanding. In order to assist patrons in an increasingly complex information environment (Buss, 2016), a requisite knowledge of collections spans a global understanding of the creation, storage, and retrieval practices of information, including historical perspectives on formats and availability options. First, imagine a consolidated desk designed to replicate the physical appearance of a standard circulation desk, as illustrated in *Figure 1*. This model requires patrons to intuit that they can ask deeply complex and critical questions in the same space that they borrow a laptop. What this approach misses entirely, regardless of the category of employee staffing the desk, is the value of the library as a unique social space rooted in democratic values of equitable access to information (Budd, 2008). Libraries provide our patrons with skilled human interactions that intentionally facilitate specific social goals. Library services have an important campus role in supporting scholarship, encouraging academic inquiry, facilitating equitable access to sources and fostering research skill development. This understanding puts front-line service in a different category of social activity and importance than a corporate customer service desk.

Another option is for the library service desk to become the campus concierge desk. Staffed by either students or library technicians, these employees would have proficient knowledge of academic supports on campus, such as research help by librarians, writing help by tutors, course advising by advisors, health supports by various specialists, and more. Their role would be to facilitate access to these services that are available exclusively by appointment. Beyond looking up a title, all other library questions would be referred for professional staff to handle. Patrons would approach the desk to find a welcoming person, likely an upper-level student, who would be knowledgeable and personable but would rarely be the one to solve their problems beyond simple tasks. Variations of student employee concierge models are being employed in some libraries (Bodemer, 2014; Faix, 2014; Faix et al., 2010; Hogan & Conlin, 2019). This model can be seen to have benefits, especially regarding convenience for patrons, cost-savings for administrators, and scheduling efficiency for service providers. However, reconciling this approach with the foundational values of librarianship regarding privacy, academic freedom and academic integrity (Budd, 2008) are mostly unaddressed in the literature recommending peer reference. The concierge approach also runs a risk of further obscuring the value of professional library skills to a campus by reducing their visibility.

Conclusion

At UBC Okanagan Library, we have intentionally designed a service model that showcases the value that human-delivered library services contribute to the institution. Our service zone approach offers a step forward on an evolving continuum of library service delivery. Since leading the collaborative team which guided our 2018 redesign, I have conducted comparative research into service models in British Columbia post-secondary libraries (Sobol, 2019). Local situations and populations matter significantly in determining practical and innovative approaches to both design and staffing. In our context, we are confident that neither a transaction-focused physical design nor an exclusively student staffing approach would position our library for future success.

Developing robust measures of assessment that allow us to demonstrate the value of our service model to patrons and administrators remains a top priority.

As a profession, we need to carefully consider how the visible work that we do reflects our broader contributions to the organizations that we fit within. We need to figure out how to intentionally create physical and virtual spaces that are sufficiently thoughtful to encourage and support patrons and uphold professional values, while satisfying corporate models of institutional administration. One could argue that by demonstrating the value of front-line service to meet administrator expectations, one is tipping the scales towards a corporate understanding of decision-making in an academic library. However, I would argue that at UBC Okanagan Library our redesign was more deliberate. In order to preserve and promote fundamental professional values, a redesign of our consolidated desk away from a concierge-type model was required. Similar to Johnson (2018), I believe there is an opportunity at this point in time to reposition librarian skills as crucial contributors throughout post-secondary institutions. However, I argue further that library service models also need to reflect those far-reaching contributions. We need to position the work that we do in a way that can be understood by campus administrators while remaining solidly grounded in professional values. At UBC Okanagan Library, our service vision includes professional employees in a range of roles delivering high-quality scholarly support in an environment tied to student satisfaction, collaborative engagement, and the pursuit of critical inquiry. If consolidated service models are to thrive, librarians need to do a much better job of articulating the uniqueness on offer in academic library service spaces.

By rethinking the main space of a library as one designed to actively encourage scholarly engagement through human interaction, rather than simply creating additional variations of a customer service desk, important questions arise. Does a service model support scholarship or reinforce corporate values of customer service and efficiency? Are those factors antithetical to one another or can they be balanced? Is the role of the academic library to provide for all the basic needs of patrons? Should technology loans and copy services be library services or do these detract from our key message of scholarly support? How can the inclusion of diverse perspectives in service design and delivery lead to innovation? How does a single location for service influence complimentary endeavors to support learning and research? How can the service desk be used as a means of continued commitment to professional library values? These questions need to be examined through experimentation with service model design, staffing approaches, and relevant measures of assessment.

A robust professional discourse is required to determine how to support academic library patrons in a way that elicits questions which delve deeply into all types of sources of information to advance knowledge, to solve problems, to increase equity, and to challenge power. Efforts to improve the visibility of complex support to patrons and to clearly demonstrate the values of these services to administrators will position academic libraries to make front-line service decisions according to criteria that align with professional values, rather than neoliberal criteria. Libraries are founded on principles that support taking the time and effort necessary to provide individualized support with complex questions, and contemporary library professionals must find ways

to ensure that front-line services continue to reflect these commitments. Efficiency, quantitative measures of value, and surface level arguments regarding the availability of information online and the simplicity of access are all real threats to the future of complex library services. In order to succeed at our core purpose of supporting patrons, we need to find ways to enhance the visibility of complex supports within our physical space. An alternative is that complex services will cease to be valued and funded, and they will wither away.

References

- Accardi, M. T. (2017). *The feminist reference desk: Concepts, critiques, and conversations*. Sacramento, California: Library Juice Press.
- Aguiar, P., Keating, K., Schadl, S., & Van Reenen, J. (2011). [Reference as outreach: Meeting users where they are](#). *Journal of Library Administration*, 51(4), 343–358.
- Alexander, S., & Wakimoto, D. K. (2019). [Exploration of reference models in a public university system](#). *Reference Services Review*, 47(1), 21–36.
- Bodemer, B. (2014). [They CAN and they SHOULD: Undergraduates providing peer reference and instruction](#). *College & Research Libraries*, 75(2), 162–178.
- Bowron, C.R., & Weber, J.E. (2017). [Implementing the READ Scale at the Austin Peay State University Library](#). *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 43(6): 518–525.
- Budd, J.M. (2008). *Self-examination: The present and future of librarianship*. Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited.
- Bunnett, B., Boehme, A., Hardin, S., Arvin, S., Evans, K., Huey, P., & LaBella, C. (2016). [Where did the reference desk go? Transforming staff and space to meet user needs](#). *Journal of Access Services*, 13(2), 66–79.
- Burnette, M. (2017). [Tacit knowledge sharing among library colleagues: A pilot study](#). *Reference Services Review*, 45(3), 382–397.
- Buschman, J. (2015). [Librarianship and the arc of crisis: The road to institutionalized cultural neoliberalism](#). *MediaTropes*, 5(2), 1–18.
- Buschman, J. (2017). [The politics of academic librarianship: Space—and its context](#). *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 43(1), 87–88.
- Buss, S. P. (2016). [Do we still need reference services in the age of Google and Wikipedia?](#) *Reference Librarian*, 57(4), 265–271.

- Chauvet, M., Bourbous, V., & Liston, F. (2016). [Service matters: Single service point as a collaborative and professional learning initiative for service excellence](#). *Journal of Access Services*, 13(2), 80–90.
- Clark, S. (2016). [On the other side of the reference desk: Exploring undergraduates' information search mediation experiences through the ACRL framework](#) (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database.
- Côté, J.E., & Allahar, A.L. (2011). *Lowering higher education: The rise of corporate universities and the fall of liberal education*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- Daniel, D. (2013). [Gender, race, and age of librarians and users have an impact on the perceived approachability of librarians](#). *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 8(3), 73–75
- Dickerson, M. (2016). [Beta spaces as a model for recontextualizing reference services in libraries](#). *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, May, [n.p.].
- Escobar, H., Gauder, H., & Rice, F. (2012). [Change by the numbers: Using data to asses and transform library service environments](#). *Catholic Library World*, 83(1), 19–25.
- Everall, K., & Logan, J. (2017). [A mixed methods approach to iterative service design of an in-person reference service point](#). *Evidence Based Library & Information Practice*, 12(4), 178–185.
- Faix, A. I., (2014). [Peer reference revisited: Evolution of a peer-reference model](#). *Reference Services Review*, 42(2), 305–319.
- Faix, A. I., Bates, M. H., Hartman, L. A., Hughes, J. H., Schacher, C. N., Elliot, B. J., & Woods, A. D. (2010). [Peer reference redefined: New uses for undergraduate students](#). *Reference Services Review*, 38(1), 90–107.
- Gardner, B., Napier, T. L., & Carpenter, R. G. (2013). [Reinventing library spaces and services: Harnessing campus partnerships to initiate and sustain transformational change](#). *Mergers and Alliances: The Operational View and Cases (Advances in Librarianship*, 37), 135–151.
- Hockey, J.M. (2016). [Transforming library enquiry services: Anytime, anywhere, any device](#). *Library Management*, 37(3), 125–135.
- Hogan, S., & Conlin, K. (2019). [Library student employee expertise: Strategies for maximizing your student employee contributions to the library](#). *Public Services Quarterly*, 15(2), 104–115.

- Hoppe, E., & Jung, K. (2017). Proceed with care: Reviewing reference services through a feminist lens. In M.T. Accardi (Ed.), *The feminist reference desk: Concepts, critiques and conversations* (pp. 137–159). Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press.
- Johnson, A. M. (2018). [Connections, conversations, and visibility: How the work of academic reference and liaison librarians is evolving](#). *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 58(2), 91–102.
- Kalinec-Craig, C.A. (2017). [The rights of the learner: A framework for promoting equity through formative assessment in mathematics education](#). *Democracy in Education*, 25(2), 1–11.
- Klinenberg, E. (2018). *Palaces for the people: How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Krieb, D. (2018). [Assessing the impact of reference assistance and library instruction on retention and grades using student tracking technology](#). *Evidence Based Library & Information Practice*, 13(2), 2–12.
- Lilbern, J. (2017). [Ideology and audit culture: Standardized service quality](#). portal: *Libraries and the Academy*, 17(1), 91–110.
- Mattern, S. (2014). [Library as infrastructure](#). *Places Journal*, June, [n.p.].
- Mohess, N. (2016). [From service analysis to staff development: A reference desk gap analysis at a community college](#). *Community & Junior College Libraries*, 22(3–4), 125–140.
- Nicholson, K.P. (2015). [The McDonaldization of academic libraries and the values of transformational change](#). *College and Research Libraries*, 76(3), 328–338.
- Pierce, S., & Schilling, A. (2019). [Removing the invisibility cloak: Using space design to influence patron behavior and increase service desk usage](#). *Journal of Access Services*, 16(2), 56–77.
- Prentice, K. A., & Argyropoulos, E. K. (2018). [Library space: Assessment and planning through a space utilization study](#). *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 37(2), 132–141.
- Rogers, E. & Carrier, H.S. (2017). [A qualitative investigation of patrons' experiences with academic library research consultations](#). *Reference Services Review*, 45(1), 18–37.
- Si, L., Zeng, Y., Guo, S., & Zhuang, X. (2019). [Investigation and analysis of research support services in academic libraries](#). *The Electronic Library*, 37(2), 281–301.
- Skellen, K., & Kyrychenko, A. (2016). [How less is truly more: Merging library support services](#). *Journal of Access Services*, 13(2), 141–149.

- Sobol, B. (2019). [Library service delivery models in British Columbia: A report for practitioners](https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubclibraryandarchives/494/items/1.0385183). Retrieved from <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubclibraryandarchives/494/items/1.0385183>
- Sobol, B., & Buschert, K. (2018). [Redesigning the library: Making transformative learning visible](#) [Poster]. Presented at *14th Annual Learning Conference*. Kelowna, BC: UBC Okanagan Centre for Teaching and Learning.
- Sobol, B., & Buschert, K. (2019). [Collaborative service model redesign](#). *BCLA Perspectives*, 19(4).
- Steger, M.B. & Roy, R.K. (2010). *Neoliberalism: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Talbert, R. (2018). Spaces: Designing learning spaces with the rights of the learner in mind. Presented at *14th Annual Learning Conference*. Kelowna: UBC Okanagan Centre for Teaching and Learning.
- UBC Okanagan Campus. (2018). [Facts and figures](#).
- UCLA Library. (2018). [Powell Library: Inquiry Space](#).
- Venner, M., & Keshmiripour, S. (2016). [X marks the spot: Creating and managing a single service point to improve customer service and maximize resources](#). *Journal of Access Services*, (13)2, 101–111.
- Warisee Sosulski, N., Tyckoson, D. (2018). [A reference for that: Reference in the age of disinformation](#). *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, (57)3, 178–182.
- Weber, J. E., & Bowron, C. R. (2019). [The evolving reference desk: If we scrap it, then what?](#) *Tennessee Libraries*, 69(2), 1.