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How IT Continuing Education Has Transformed Our Library

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How IT Continuing Education has Transformed our Library

IN DEPTH

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Having the skills and knowledge to adequately respond to technology-based information demands has never been more important. When the library at East Tennessee State University was opened in 1999, it was the first new academic building that had been constructed on the campus in a number of years. During the design development phase, the librarians worked with the architects to create a facility that would have the adequate infrastructure for the information technology used in the 1990's. At that time, all of the computers were required to have data connection cabling. All cabling was designed to be carried though the floors.

The reference area was considered the principal site for research and instruction. A reference collection of some 25,000 volumes was moved from the old facility to the new, and 24 computer workstations were placed through the center of the reference room. At the back of reference, the library had a smart classroom, outfitted with an instructor's workstation, a data projector, an Elmo overhead projector, and sixteen student workstations. Most classes involved the students following the librarian through a session using relevant databases.

In many ways, the interior of the library had a very traditional layout. Circulation was across from reference on the first floor. Other departments such as Periodicals, Government Documents, and the Archives were arranged according to foot traffic at the front of the building on higher floors. A large book stack area for the circulating collection lay at the back of the building on each floor. Since the building was the newest structure on campus and centrally located, it was immediately popular as a gathering place for students. It was also viewed as prime real estate for other units on campus. A mural from the Appalachian Studies Center was hung on the first floor. The campus tutoring services set up shop in classrooms on the third floor, and instructors in a number of departments used study rooms to meet with students.

As the Office of Information Technology's training section grew and developed a twofold mission of providing technology to students (principally through computer labs) and training to faculty and staff, the section of the unit devoted to training faculty and staff was split off as a new department called Academic Technology Services (ATS). Due to the growth of the Office of Information Technology, ATS had spread into a number of buildings, repurposed to provide support and instruction.

In 2003, the Director of ATS met with the Dean of the Library to look at several areas which might be converted into a home for ATS. They finally settled on a large area at the back of the reference room. It was considered a good location for the new ATS offices, since the their staff needed office space to provide individual help to clients as well as manage and prepare their workshops. The Dean and the ATS Director also decided to transfer the smart classroom to ATS. Since both areas were the responsibility of the Head of Reference, and moving the collection out of the area would require significant staff time, they asked him if he would be willing to give up the area in exchange for services or technology yet to be determined.

After a long discussion, looking at the advantages and disadvantages of giving up the space and the classroom, the Dean and the Head of Reference decided to go along with the plan with several stipulations outlined below. The stack area at the back of Reference housed old editions of indexes. While it was the policy of the library not to subscribe to both print and electronic versions of an index, the older editions which were duplicated electronically had been retained. A new policy was set to withdraw print indexes duplicated by electronic subscriptions. This change was more revolutionary than it might sound, because at the time, there were many questions about budgeting for renewals and ownership of electronic databases if subscriptions lapsed. In the end most of the retrospective collections were withdrawn. Probably the most difficult decision was to give up the smart classroom, as it was well outfitted and used by other departments in addition to the library. The library had another large classroom on the third floor, although it was not a smart classroom. The Director of ATS agreed to refit the third floor classroom as a smart classroom with equipment the library selected. ATS also initially offered to let the library use the first floor classroom; however, due to the course load of ATS, the library has rarely been able to utilize the room.

Between the time the library was planned and the date it opened, wireless technology grew as an important mode for transmitting

information. The new building was, unfortunately, planned without wireless network capability. By the early 2000's library users were beginning to use more technology that required wireless capability.

We were between the PDA era and the Smartphone era, and most laptops were also incorporating wireless technology. It was finally decided that the best bargain for giving up the space would be the installation of a wireless network in the library building. The network would also benefit ATS and any other units working in the building. Consequently the first wireless hubs were set up in the library.

Almost as an afterthought, ATS offered to hold a place in its Faculty Technology Leadership (FTL) class for a member of the library faculty. Each year ATS offers a two-semester, graduate-level course called Faculty Technology Leadership to a select group of faculty across disciplines. The purpose of the course is both to train faculty in advanced educational technology and to encourage the development of online courses. As a bonus, participants are given the means to use the technology, including video cameras, laptops with programs such as Camtasia, and other equipment to develop multimedia presentations. Librarians immediately responded to this opportunity, and for almost every year since ATS moved to the library, a librarian has participated in the class.

ATS Staffer Adam Greever with Dr.Susan Epps in the FTL Classroom

Having ATS in the library provides the added benefit of immediate assistance with technology, as well as attracting faculty and staff from other departments to the library. Now that ATS has been in the library for ten years, the entire library faculty has made the commitment to complete the FTL course, and new library faculty members are encouraged to enroll in the course at their earliest opportunity. The skills and knowledge taken from the FTL course have transformed the library in almost every area. The following list outlines some of the ways librarians incorporate technology into their work:

- Using the university's course content management system to market library resources and serve as a training site for student workers and graduate assistants
- Responding to online reference questions with short Camtasia and other multimedia videos
- Using LibGuides (web-based subject guides) as basic research guides, as specific course guide, and as organizational tools
- Incorporating the QuestionPoint chat service into reference
- Developing streaming video through local hosting on the ATS server

A major consequence of incorporating elearning technology has been a restructuring of the library. This emphasis on elearning has created a fluid environment for librarians, so that as users' information needs change, our jobs have been transformed. Every librarian's job description now incorporates technology relevant to their specialty, and new hires are now expected to have a technology skill-set applicable to their specific job. For example, candidates for the distance education librarian position had to demonstrate competence with Adobe Connect and other web conferencing applications.In addition to changing the administrative structure, the physical structure of the library has undergone major changes.

First Floor of the Library

The reference area is now classified as a computer lab, with more workstations and improved printing. The reference desk itself is also the center for IT advisors who lend laptops and other equipment and help students configure their laptops and tablets for use on the campus network. The IT workers have taken the job of technology trouble-shooting from the library staff, so that librarians now have more time to concentrate on helping users with content. With the wireless network, service points in all departments are busier because patrons take laptops to all areas of the building. Probably the greatest change can be seen on the first floor. Beyond the reference and circulation departments, the stack area has been replaced with a tutoring and writing center, a testing center, and a café/deli, in addition to an expanded ATS.

Earth Day Event in the Library Plaza

The library as place has become more important. During the past five years a complex of new dormitories was built in the area next to the library. Since the majority of students living on campus now pass the library to go to the student center, classroom buildings, or campus recreation facilities, the library and the plaza in front of the library have become the true center of the campus. Students have definitely come to view the library differently and are requesting that we provide services 24/7, year-round. Now that the library has been retooled, students see the library as an indispensable resource, a place to do research, a place to get help with research and writing, and a place to meet and study. We must meet the challenges presented by our students' new perspective of our value to the university, and with the help of our friends in ATS, we feel we can meet these challenges.

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