Getting the picture: Interviews and photo elicitation at Edmonton Public Library

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Abstract

As part of its Library Spaces Business Plan initiative, Edmonton Public Library (EPL) conducted interviews paired with photo elicitation to explore customers' perceptions of their library spaces and to better understand how customers use those spaces. Sixteen interviews were conducted with participants at 5 branches of the EPL with participants taking photographs used during the interview. Findings revealed the comprehensive views participants' hold about the library; the library's spaces are not distinct from the collections and services offered within them.

Keywords

Public libraries, library space, interviews, photo elicitation

Introduction

Research focusing on the use of library space, and the needs and wants of users for that space has become more prominent in library and information science/studies (LIS) research. Libraries are vibrant community spaces that provide users with access to everything ranging from programs, to collections, to meeting spaces, necessitating further research into how library space can be optimized for them. Edmonton Public Library (EPL) conducted interviews paired with photo elicitation as part of its Business Plan initiative to better understand how customers want to use library space in the present and the future. The results gathered from the interviews along with data gathered from other Library Spaces research projects were used to make recommendations for renovations of existing spaces, and building projects at EPL.

Background

EPL is comprised of 17 branches throughout Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and serves a population 812 2012 (Statistics Canada). EPL currently has five building projects in the planning stages or underway, two of which are entirely new branches being built to serve growing communities.

EPL's Business Plan includes a goal to "create open, safe and inspiring physical and virtual spaces" and goes on to state "we understand how customers use our spaces and do something about it" as an objective (Edmonton Public Library, 2011, p. 7, 16). To help achieve this goal EPL hired two librarian interns to "research trends and analyze how customers interact in and use our library spaces" (Edmonton Public Library, 2011, p. 16). The questions guiding this research were:

1. What are customers doing in EPL's spaces?
2. How would customers like to be using EPL's spaces?
3. What are current and future trends in library spaces and customer activities?
4. How could EPL's spaces best meet the needs of EPL's customers?

In order to address all the research questions a triangulated methodology was used and included discussions to gain feedback from staff members, behavioural mapping (also known as seating sweeps), community partner questionnaires, surveys, and semi-structured qualitative interviews paired with photo elicitation. This article focuses on the interviews and photo elicitation conducted with EPL customers, which were designed to build on the data gathered from surveys, staff member feedback, and behavioural mapping. This method was chosen to gather more in depth feedback; gaining a deeper perspective into what EPL customers need and want from EPL's spaces. This method addressed research questions one, two, and four.

Literature Review

In exploring the literature, the researchers focused on studies done in libraries that used semi-structured interviews to explore issues around space. Additionally, they reviewed literature discussing the use of photo elicitation in association with interviews, focusing more on literature from other fields, particularly anthropology and sociology, due to the lack of literature in the field of LIS discussing the use of this method.

Interviews about Library Space

One of the most influential space studies done in public libraries is that by Leckie and Hopkins (2002) in which they explored use of the central libraries in Toronto and Vancouver. Among the various methods used in their research were interviews with library users in which users discussed the importance of qualities of the space such as quiet, comfort, and aesthetics in enhancing the attractiveness of the space for activities such as studying and reading. Leckie's and Hopkin's work has inspired several replication studies including Most's (2009) exploration of public library use in rural Florida. Her interviews with library users found that when discussing the best feature of the library, users discussed "computer access, the collections and resources, the locations, the helpfulness or friendliness of the staff, and the atmosphere of the libraries variously as the best features" (Most, 2009, p. 153). Another notable replication study is May and Black's (2010) research conducted at three urban and three rural public libraries in Nova Scotia. Interviews with library users found that in association with physical spaces, patrons were positive about natural light and spaciousness and critical of noise or lack of cleanliness, among other factors.

Aabø and Audunson's (2012) study in three public libraries in Oslo paired observational methods with brief interviews with library users and found that users came to the library and engaged in a wide range of activities both solitary and social in a socially inclusive space. Bailin (2011) explored students' satisfaction with the library's space using brief structured interviews at the University of New South Wales, which reinforced the need to provide both quiet and social spaces in the library for different working styles of students. Engel and Antell (2004) used a survey of members of the Association of Research Libraries as well as interviews with ten faculty members at the University of Oklahoma to explore their use and how they value faculty spaces (lockable carrels or studies) in library spaces. Faculty members interviewed were very

passionate about having access to these spaces in the library and valued them for the solitude they provided and the ease of access for browsing the collection.

Photo elicitation

Photo elicitation as a method is relatively new to research in LIS, although it has frequently been used in the fields of anthropology and sociology, particularly as a part of ethnographic studies. Clark-Ibáñez (2007, p. 177) provides an excellent description of the benefits of the methods when she notes, “photographs used in photo elicitation have a dual purpose. Researchers can use photographs as a tool to expand on questions, and simultaneously, subjects can use photographs to provide a unique way to communicate dimensions of their lives”. Similarly, Samuels (2007, p. 199) when advocating for using photographs taken by the participant cites the argument that “using the subjects’ own photographs in the interview process gives primacy to their world and provides a greater opportunity for research subjects to create their own sense of meaning and disclose it to the researcher”. The researchers consulted several resources in order to understand the best practices in utilizing photo elicitation as a research method (see Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Lorenz & Kolb, 2009; Meo, 2010; Pink, 2007; Stanczak, 2007; Van Auken, Frisvoll, & Stewart, 2010).

Publications about the use of visual research methods within LIS are not extensive, but a few specific projects are particularly noteworthy as they inspired the use of this method for the research at EPL. While some of these projects use different terms, the photography element of their research can be described as photo elicitation. As part of a larger ethnographic research project at the University of Rochester, Briden (2007) writes about the “photo survey” project the library conducted in which they provided students with disposable cameras and a list of photo requests. The photos were then used as the basis for an interview with the student. The project provided significant insight into the study habits of students, how they use the library space, and provided a visual aspect to these findings. The project at the University of Rochester inspired several similar research projects at other universities and colleges. For example, as part of a larger research initiative undertaken at five academic libraries in Illinois, Treadwell, Binder, and Tagge (2012) discuss the use of ethnographic interviews and photo diaries at the University of Illinois at Springfield. This research project highlighted several space needs, including improved wayfinding and the necessity of providing quiet study space for students within the library as well as more communal group workspaces. Another research project that was inspired by the Rochester example was Hobbs and Klare’s (2010) ethnographic study at Wesleyan University to gather input prior to designing a new student study space at one of the libraries on campus. The project utilized photo elicitation interviews, mapping diaries, and an architectural design exercise to gather input from students, which ultimately emphasized the importance of flexible space, comfortable furniture, natural lighting, and spaces that accommodate individual and group study.

Several anthropological and sociological studies have utilized photo elicitation in studies exploring space and/or place specifically. Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Wolsey’s (2008) study of the effect of school facilities on the learning and teaching behaviours of students used interviews, focus groups, photo elicitation interviews, and walking tours in two middle schools in the United States. They found that space for movement, flexibility in spaces, lighting, and aesthetics were all major factors that made school facilities more conducive for effective learning and teaching. In a study exploring attachment to place in four communities in western Alberta

and western Newfoundland, Beckley, Stedman, Wallace, and Ambard (2007) used photos taken by participants, who were residents in the communities, and interviews to engage them in conversation and found the method yielded rich and complex data about the biophysical and sociocultural elements that result in attachment to places. Liesch (2011) used photo elicitation in interviews and small focus groups to explore how residents in and around Michigan's Keweenaw National Historical Park conceive it, and found social class was the greatest factor in categorizing their perceptions of the park. MacKay and Couldwell (2004) used visitor-employed photography to understand what best encapsulated visitors' image of a national historic site in Saskatchewan, Canada, and found that infrastructure, animation, and personalization were the three major themes in the captured images. Beilin's (2005) photo elicitation study with farmers in south-eastern Australia emphasized how the visual element in the interviews allowed for the researcher to gain richer insights into the farmers' views on their land and their relationship with it. Jorgensen and Sullivan's (2010) study of children's use of technology in their homes used photo elicitation interviews and found that while children's homes had a variety of technologies available, their access and ability to use the technology was mediated by the adults within the household.

Design

To explore the major research questions outlined above, the researchers conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with EPL customers using photo elicitation. Participants for interviews were recruited through a question on the library spaces customer survey (another research project which is not the focus of this article) that asked respondents if they would be willing to participate in an interview about library spaces. Recruitment was done using both a print card (see Appendix A) as well as online as part of the online version of the survey on SurveyMonkey. Potential participants were asked for basic contact information and their preferred branch for the interview to take place.

Over four weeks in early 2012, 155 EPL customers volunteered to participate in interviews. The researchers selected 5 of EPL's 17 branches in which to conduct interviews, based on their geographic distribution in the city of Edmonton and the number of customers that selected that branch as their preferred location for an interview. From 30 January to 23 February 2012, 16 usable interviews were conducted by the researchers. Following the completion of the 16 interviews, the other customers that volunteered for interviews were contacted to let them know they had not been selected and to thank them for their willingness to participate.

In the interviews, participants were first asked to sign a consent form and given their own copy of it. After they signed the form, participants were then given a list of four statements to take pictures of (see Appendix B) and a digital camera. Participants were accompanied by the researcher conducting the interview while they took photos of the branch to maintain the security of the digital camera and to capture any comments made by participants to follow up on during the interview. Photos were then uploaded to a computer to display to the participant during the interview. The researcher used an interview guide (see Appendix C) during their discussion with the customer and all interviews were digitally audio-recorded. Recordings of interviews ranged from just under 7 minutes to over 35 minutes.

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher that conducted the interview and pseudonyms were assigned to all of the participants. Transcripts were then analyzed using thematic coding with 15 distinct themes emerging.

Findings & Discussion

In reviewing the transcripts of the interviews and the associated photos, the researchers gained a better picture of customers' perceptions and views on the library space.

Space

Figure 1. Myrna - Clear sightlines within the branch

In their interviews, twelve participants discussed the idea of space which incorporated topics like open spaces, increasing the space of a specific area within the library or expanding the library as a whole, and other properties of the libraries' spaces such as sightlines, nooks, and enclosed spaces like program rooms. Participants heavily emphasized the importance of having an open space design within the library for a variety of reasons. A few noted that the atmosphere an open space design creates was positive for them. Other participants valued the clear sightlines open space design provided which allowed them to see large sections of the library or the entire library (see Figure 1).

Open space design was particularly of value to parents who wanted to keep track of their children or for participants hoping to encounter individuals they knew. However, to complement the open design, some participants also emphasized the need for enclosed spaces. One of the participants cited a recent experience attending a program with her young son that had taken place on the public floor of the library branch and noted that she preferred programs in the programming room as it prevented her son from running too far. From this more practical need for enclosed spaces, other participants discussed the need for enclosed spaces as they encouraged different kinds of behaviour. One of the participants felt open spaces were better suited for social behaviours and wanted flexible enclosed spaces through the use of partitions to create quiet areas for reading and similar activities. This concept of different types of spaces within the library being suited to different activities resonates with similar findings from studies in academic libraries, particularly Hobbs and Klare's (2010) student design project.

Creating a space that works for different types of library users was also emphasized by one participant who is a self-described heavy user of the library but also said, "I'm here a lot but I don't use the physical space that much, if that makes any sense." She repeatedly noted the importance of designing the space to work well for customers whose visits are very brief, coming in to pick up holds and then leave again, a visit type that a majority of the other participants noted was most common for them.

Other People/Community

All sixteen participants discussed other people in library spaces as part of their interviews. This included comments about people with whom they come to the library, how other people use library space, the idea of the library as a community space, as well as mentions of privacy or crowding.

Many participants described library spaces to be a place that facilitates interaction, a place for them or their children to meet and interact with others. One participant described the library as a social space allowing the participant to meet other parents and her daughter to socialize with other children. Several other participants discussed meeting people they knew in the library or coming to the library with others. However, it was predominantly participants who came to the library with their children that described it as a social space.

Conversely, some participants found the presence of other people in library spaces to have a negative effect on their visit. Children in adult spaces were specifically mentioned as detracting from participants' enjoyment of library spaces. One participant found it frustrating that he often encountered children in the quieter areas of the library and another suggested enclosing the entire children's area in his branch to prevent the noise from carrying throughout the library. However, many of the participants who were frustrated by the noise created by children were also cognizant that library spaces needed to work for everyone. While noise was the most common negative factor associated with other library users, some participants also touched on the idea of feeling crowded in areas of the library due to lack of space, high traffic, and use from other customers.

Several participants were very positive about the use of libraries by others and felt that the library provided a space for the community to gather. The library functioning as a meeting

place, a place to gather with friends was seen as a positive attribute. One of the participants described the gathering of the community at her branch as something she found inspiring, “It’s a really community, a place to get people together [...] The library can really serve as a social hub [...] A place where it’s non-commercial.” While this participant was the only one to so explicitly articulate the idea of the library as a “third space”, the concept was one that reappeared in several other interviews.

A recurring theme that appeared in the majority of our discussions noted the positive community feel of the library but also emphasized the importance of providing spaces for everyone. One of the participants discussed this theme extensively, specifically highlighting that the space needs to be available for the homeless population who have nowhere else to go. However, she also emphasized the tension that can occur trying to maintain different cultures in the library; people wanting to do different things that might conflict with one another. She felt that this tension created between different populations needs to be alleviated in order to maintain a comfortable space for everyone. The discussion of other users within the library has been relatively limited in other library spaces research. However, Leckie and Hopkins (2002, p. 349) note that when asked about appropriate behaviours in the library, participants stated library users should be quiet and respectful.

Noise Levels

Participants often discussed the noise they experienced in library spaces, which included either the noise created by others or the noise enhanced by the acoustics of the building. Nine of the participants made reference to noise in library spaces.

Children and customers gathering to talk were frequently cited as a contributor to the noise that participants found frustrating. This frustration was increased if participants were using the library space in order to study or do work. However, it is important to note that while there were participants seeking a quiet space to work, they also did not demand the entire library be silent. For example, a participant who was frustrated by her inability to find a quiet space to work that provided her with the furniture and technology she required stated:

Now, I don’t want to go back to the days where you know if you coughed you had somebody come up behind you and smack you. [...] There is no one place [...] that has the plug-ins, the assumption of silence, [...] all together in one place.

In contrast, some customers found noise in the library to be positive. They discussed it as a sign that people were using libraries and gathering with their community. One participant who preferred quiet in the library space explicitly stated that she was happy to have to deal with noise as it meant other, and in this case younger, people were also using the library space.

The other source of noise in libraries that participants discussed was that created by the acoustics of the space. Three participants mentioned the negative effects that the acoustics of their respective branches have on their visits to the library. Specifically, spaces that echoed noise from one area to another adding to the overall noise level were frustrating to participants. One participant cited the acoustics outside the washroom area of his branch to be particularly problematic (see Figure 2), especially when browsing collections nearby, due to the noises and high traffic associated with the area.

Figure 2. Laurence - Least favourite place due to poor acoustics

The negative impact of noise on customers emphasizes the importance of zoning in library spaces in order to facilitate the variety of activities customers would like to participate in that encompass a wide range of noise levels. These findings are similar to those of several studies done in academic libraries (see Bailin, 2011; Hobbs & Klare, 2010; Treadwell et al., 2012) that all received similar responses from students about the need for different noise levels in study spaces to accommodate group and individual needs.

Collections

Participants frequently referred to collections in their interviews, with fifteen discussing the topic, many in reference to their typical visit to the library. The following participant description of her normal visit is typical for most of the participants, “a normal visit’s pretty much dropping off books, picking up new things. So a little bit of browsing, seeing what’s new especially. [...] And I usually have holds to pick up as well.” Of greatest interest to the researchers was that while some participants discussed other formats such as CDs, DVDs, audiobooks, and magazines, most typically when they talked about collections they talked about books (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. James - Favourite space

One participant eloquently expressed her thoughts on why participants who were being asked to discuss library space spent so much time talking about collections:

I know that this focuses [...] on the spaces and everything, but for me the library is really primarily about the collection. [...] I kind of feel like that's starting to get undervalued in the libraries, and it's still [...] a main area of concern for me, and I guess I wanted to be able to [...] express that.

Intriguingly, even the participant who noted she primarily reads electronically expressed her sadness at seeing entirely empty bookshelves in the library. This strong association between the library and books appeared in all of the interviews.

In addition to discussing the collection itself, some participants expressed their difficulties in negotiating the organization system. While this was more common in discussing the CD and DVD collections, one participant also found the Dewey Decimal system unclear. However, while the organizational systems were perceived by some participants as difficult to understand, several participants also emphasized the importance of displays in how they interacted with the collections. Another major element that came up in discussions with the participants was the major role holds played in how they utilized the library's space and the

collections. The heavy emphasis on collections by the participants is similar to that in Most's (2009) study in rural public libraries in Florida where her participants named collections and resources as one of the best features of the library.

Virtual Space

While only six participants explicitly discussed EPL's virtual spaces, almost all of them discussed using holds which implies at minimum they interact with the online catalogue in-branch (see Figure 4). Several customers described themselves as heavy users of the online catalogue and a few explicitly stated EPL's virtual spaces had altered how they used the library's physical spaces. One participant explicitly stated that he now did almost all of his browsing online, placed the desired items on hold, and spent minimal time in the physical library as he just went in to pick up items and then left again. While previous spaces research has not discussed the phenomenon of virtual spaces altering the use of physical spaces explicitly, several studies of library space usage in academic libraries have been initiated by the question of whether space is still being used when many resources are available online (see Engel & Antel, 2004).

Figure 4. Rita - Catalogue stations in-branch

Technology

A variety of technologies were discussed by participants in conjunction with library spaces. Fifteen participants mentioned a variety of technologies such as computers, self check-outs, plug-ins, Wi-Fi, and various handheld devices.

Many participants discussed why or why not they choose to use EPL computers during their library visit. Two participants highlighted the children's computers as their favourite space, detailing their children's excitement about using the computers and their excitement about the resource the computers provide for their children.

Figure 5. Howard - Library computer use

Other participants talked about their computer use as a part of their daily visit; checking email, using library resources, surfing the web, listening to music, etc. (see Figure 5). However, several participants mentioned that they do not use library computers. The most common reason for this choice was that they already had access to this kind of technology and preferred to use their own. One participant expressed the need for comfortable spaces that would enable her to bring her own technology from home and use it at the library. Associated with this use of the participant's own technology in the library was the issue of the lack of available plug-ins that one participant in particular struggled with. Another aspect of discussions around technology were the suggestions participants made for technology they would like to see in their libraries. One

suggestion that particularly interested the researchers was the addition of a digital media wall as a way to combine technology and the display of art or information within the library. The wide range of approaches to technology that the interview participants described emphasize the need for flexibility within the library in its provision of and support for technology.

Interviews with participants highlighted the variety of ways that they choose to use or not use technology in the library. This overlaps with findings from the photo project conducted at the University of Rochester, which found that students' decisions to use their own technology or the library's computers was highly influenced by the time of day and the activity for which they had come to the library (Briden, 2007, p. 46-47).

Accessibility

Seven participants mentioned the accessibility of library spaces in their interviews. Specifically, they discussed the physical accessibility of the library buildings in terms of location or the accessibility of the interior of library buildings (e.g. accessibility of spaces for strollers, accessibility of items on lower shelves).

The physical location of a library building was discussed as a positive factor by some participants. One participant even stated that the proximity of the library building was a factor in her decision to purchase her home.

Figure 6. Bette - Bottom shelves for holds are difficult to access

However, specific accessibility issues within library spaces were the dominant topic for this theme. Accessibility for strollers, issues with items on lower shelves, and accessibility of the front door were most commonly raised as areas that participants had difficulty with. Two participants specifically mentioned difficulty accessing items on the lower shelves (see Figure 6), and one suggested that the library should consider leaving those shelves empty to increase accessibility for customers. Also associated with the accessibility of shelving was the need to make aisles wider, not only for strollers, but to maximize access for multiple people if one had to crouch down to look at items on lower shelves.

Facilities

Figure 7. Greta - An inspiring library space

A wide-range of physical features of the library were included in the category of facilities including fireplaces, fish tanks, hours, outdoor spaces, parking, and washrooms. With such a diverse range of elements being included in one category, there was a wide range of comments from participants in this theme. However, the most important observation to come out of these responses was that regardless of how often a participant visited the library or how much time they spent there, all of them had aspects of the physical space that they liked such as a fish tank in the children's area and others that they were concerned about like the public washrooms. Each

of the interview participants had some strong feelings associated with their library's spaces. As an example, one participant, in discussing the library building as a whole, said, "I mean just walking past, it always makes me smile" (see Figure 7). The diversity of comments on the library's physical spaces is similar to the range of responses in May and Black's (2010) study in public libraries in Nova Scotia.

Additional themes that appeared less frequently in discussions with the participants were aesthetics, furniture, children's spaces, programming, safety, staff, and appreciation.

Research Implications

Findings from the interviews and photo elicitation were used in combination with results from other research conducted on spaces at EPL to make recommendations for current and future building and renovation projects. The results of the interviews and photo elicitation specifically served to emphasize that even customers who spend relatively little time in the physical library still have strong opinions about the library's spaces. The findings also reveal the many factors that are combined in the participants' perceptions of the library's spaces, which include not only physical features but also the collections, services, and other users of the library. Physical spaces are not discrete from the other aspects of the library from our participants' view.

As a case study, findings from the interviews and photo elicitation at EPL may not be transferable to other library settings. However, the method of using semi-structured qualitative interviews in combination with photo elicitation is one that could be of great use in LIS research. Having the opportunity for library users to capture photographs of their libraries allows the researcher to have tangible images of how users perceive the library. Additionally, the process of taking photos and using them within the interview context allows for the researcher to more easily build a rapport with the participant, which is particularly significant for library workers who may not have extensive research experience but want to gain feedback from library users.

Within the context of EPL, options for further research include conducting interviews with photo elicitation at the other branches of EPL to more extensively explore the perceptions of library customers of their library spaces as well as capture space issues specific to individual branches. The methods may also be of use in exploring other research questions of interest to EPL that are not related to spaces. Outside of EPL, further research to explore whether users of other public libraries also perceive their libraries spaces to be part of a larger whole rather than discrete from the collections and services offered within those spaces is worth pursuing.

Conclusion

The interviews and photo elicitation conducted at EPL provided the researchers with both literal and figurative pictures of the participants' perceptions of their library and its spaces and how they use them. Findings from this project in combination with other Library Spaces research conducted at EPL were used to make recommendations for current and future building projects and renovations. The results also served to emphasize that ultimately, the participants consider the library's spaces not as a discrete aspect of the library's services but part of a larger interconnected whole.

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INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT

Would you be willing to participate in a 30-45 minute interview to further discuss your views on EPL's library spaces? Please complete the following form and we will contact you to set up an appointment as soon as possible.

First name: _____

Last name: _____

Phone number: _____

Preferred branch location for interview: _____

Preferred time for interview (please circle one):

Morning Afternoon Evening

Personal information is collected under the authority of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, Section 33c and will be used to administer the EPL library spaces interview.

EDMONTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Appendix B – Photo Statements

Please take photos of the following (in order):

1. Your favourite place in the library.
2. Your least favourite place in the library.
3. A place in the library in which you like or would like to spend time with others.
4. Somewhere/something in the library you find inspiring.

Appendix C – Interview Guide

Display first photo to participant.

Let's talk about why this is your favourite place in the library.

Display second photo to participant.

Now let's talk about why this is your least favourite place in the library.

Display third photo to participant.

Is this a space you currently like to spend time in with a group or one where you would spend time with a group if the need arose? Tell me about why you do/ you would choose this place for doing things in a group.

Display fourth photo to participant.

Tell me about why you find this space inspiring.

(If participant did not take photo)

Tell me about the kinds of spaces that you find inspiring.

Let's talk a little bit about the things you typically do in the library.

Are there things you'd like to do in the library that you can't do right now?

What could the library do to make the space more accommodating for those activities?

Is there anything else you'd like to share about EPL's library spaces?