

Working Hard or Hardly Working: Use of Collaborative Working Space at the University of Bradford Library

Introduction

The JB Priestley Library was built in 1975 as the main library serving the University of Bradford. The upper three floors (floors 0-2) underwent extensive refurbishment in 2010-2012, where the roof was remodelled with light wells and large windows replaced the original “arrow-slits” facing the green space known as the amphitheatre (University of Bradford 2012).

This refurbishment vastly improved the ambience of the floors by enhancing natural light and airflow. However, the removal of internal walls and soft surfaces to improve the airflow also decreased the soundproofing of the floors, leading to concerns about noise transmission between floors 2 (the silent floor) and 1 (a large open space originally designated as “quiet” but now more realistically badged as “collaborative working”). Library staff perception was that floor 1 was noisy and not used productively, but beyond vague survey comments about noise there was little evidence to substantiate this. With this in mind, an ethnographic research project was undertaken to investigate the use of the floor 1 study space. The study used various modes of observation, aiming to get a clearer picture of how students were using the space.

Methodology

Library research has historically adopted traditional social research methods based on modes of self-reporting including surveys, focus groups and interviews (Ramsden 2016a). Despite this, since Bryant’s (2009) statement that ethnography was little used in libraries it has become a more popular research method (Priestner and Borg 2016). This is visible in reviews like Ramsden’s who assessed the range of ethnographic research in libraries today (2016a). However, many of the papers outlined by Ramsden (2016a) are large-scale studies in the U.S. on ‘student life’ employing professional anthropologists- thus requiring a budget not available to most UK academic libraries. The study described in this paper adds, instead, to the small but growing number of small-scale UK studies utilising ethnography (Bryant et al 2009, Harrop and Turpin 2013, Jamieson 2016).

It is important to note that within the broad term ‘ethnography’ there are multiple, varied approaches. The particular method chosen for this study was a strand of participative observation. Ramsden (2016b) further sub-divides observation into covert/overt (whether the subjects know they are being observed) and active/passive (whether the observer participates in the observed activities). Montgomery (2012) distinguishes between observation of all behaviours and those using a pre-set score-sheet. Harrop and Turpin (2013) divided their observations into “typologies” including factors such as timeliness and social interaction. The covert, passive ethnographic study at Bradford attempted to observe the space with a more open approach, only retrospectively categorising the wide observations into ‘themes’.

An ethnographic approach in examining space usage was used with the intention of avoiding common pitfalls of traditional social research methods based on self-reporting. Although these methods provide rich sets of interesting data on user opinions, when it comes to space assessment self-reporting becomes more complex. As Jerolmack and Khan’s study (2014) highlights, it can be problematic to infer behaviour from verbal accounts. Ethnography eliminates the issue of the user’s self-perceptions diminishing research reliability. Instead, the most prominent limit of ethnography is

'observer influence', which in this case was safeguarded against in using the graduate trainee; a staff member aged twenty-three who passed as a student. She had not been working at the university library for long enough to be imbedded in the staff attitudes towards the space and had not been a student at the university. The research took on a covert, passive ethnographic technique with the trainee as a non-invasive observer around whom the students would not alter their behaviour. Other than signs on the doors of the zone, there were no obvious 'research interactions' taking place.

The Floor 1 Study

Since the graduate trainee in the JB Priestley Library was frequently mistaken for a student by users, it was decided to use this as a unique advantage in observing the space as non-disruptively as possible in the form of a covert observation; a very specific type of ethnographic research.

This mode of covert ethnography was paired with more overt observations carried out by Student Learning Champions (students working part-time in the library) and library staff, working to balance any observer bias and influence that could have been at play.

The particularly interesting research undertaken was that performed by the graduate trainee sitting on floor one and making non-intrusive observations of behaviour within the space. This approach attempted to disrupt traditional power dynamics between 'researcher' and 'researched' and 'librarian' and 'student' and hoped to create a more in-depth understanding of how students really used the space. It is also note-worthy that this research approach avoided contributing to 'survey-fatigue' where students are so bombarded with surveys they become disengaged in efforts to gather information on them.

Another advantage to this covert ethnographic research method in libraries is that many traditional limits surrounding ethnography are not an issue within this context. A major issue for ethnographic research is the researcher gaining access to the environment they want to study (Bryman 2016); a non-issue for library staff observing their own libraries. The concerns around discreet note-making in traditional covert ethnographic studies (Bryman 2016) are also redundant in a library where it is commonplace for users to be making notes whilst studying. In the observation at the JB Priestley Library, the graduate trainee sat with a laptop and notepad next to several others with the same equipment.

In Sheffield Hallam University's study of behaviour in learning spaces they noted the difficulty in identifying where activities they recorded took place from their observational notes (Turpin et al 2016): this issue was overcome in the Bradford study by observing a single smaller space and using a coded floorplan where corners of the room were identifiable by letters, for example 'BL' would mean bottom left corner- corresponding to an area labelled BL on the shared floorplan. This eliminated confusion when various observers described activities taking place on floor one.

This method was very low cost, using little staff time (a couple of days) and few resources for the amount of rich data it gathered. The only essential resource is a researcher who fits the demographic they are observing, in an academic library this is someone who seems like a student (who come in all shapes and sizes). In this case the observer fit well with the perceived average age of user using 'Floor One'. Aside from this necessity, the research relies heavily on pre-existing data; the general day-to-day happenings in the library.

However, like any research method, this covert ethnographic approach had disadvantages. In avoiding self-reporting bias there was instead potential for observer bias or misinterpretation of events. It was noted that certain activities were ambiguous when it came to understanding whether the student was engaging in work or a leisure activity. Activities like watching videos could be students studying film or spending leisure time. Similarly, those using a laptop could be doing anything from writing a thesis to browsing social media. In addition to utilising a variety of observers and a primary researcher with few preconceptions of the space, to combat any potential bias the observations were reported in 'snapshot' moments rather than trying to piece together narratives, avoiding the assumptions that often come in bridging gaps in knowledge in order to 'tell a story'.

Another way observer bias was combatted was through an innovative adoption of another form of ethnography. Through spending time in the environment another mode of research arose: cyber-ethnography. It became apparent from conversations with student learning champions that a large part of the culture on floor one revolved around the social media app 'YikYak'. So the researcher created an anonymous YikYak account to view statuses posted in the vicinity of Floor One. Surprisingly cyber-ethnography seems a yet largely unexplored research method in libraries but one that could prove invaluable given students' typically heavy social media usage (Lau 2017). This allowed students to anonymously air their views on the space without being aware of observation. The comments made on YikYak ranged dramatically. One user complained about the social side of the space in worryingly gendered terms, highlighting the potential negative implications of social study spaces becoming too 'social', they wrote:

"Getting judged by other girls is literally the only reason I hate coming into the library. Its like they're not there to study but to hawk each other out..."

Other comments made an effort to 'self-police' the library as a study space with limited noise, demonstrating the responsibility often taken by students when given an environment with a level of autonomy over their behaviour such as floor one as a designated 'collaborative working' zone. One such comment was:

"To all those people that think sitting outside fl2 doors + shouting on the phone because the walls are sound proof... they're really not..."

At this point the graduate trainee ceased to be an entirely passive observer, becoming more active in engaging in the social media life of the space. At around 3pm on one of the observational days the researcher posted on YikYak anonymously asking

"How can anyone even work on Floor 1?!"

This was met with a reply that these were in fact "ideal conditions" for working. The researcher noted that this seemed contrary to the behaviour being observed, as one of their recurrent observations was that, "people seem well intentioned to work but descend into chatting v. easily". So, the insight of a student given via social media provided another important angle to the study. It was also very useful in allowing a member of staff to gather the opinions of students where both parties remain anonymous and the user is not under any pressure to reply in a self-reporting, survey-style manner or with any fear of consequences. This added another dimension to the overall

research approach. Through pragmatically reacting to the different modes of observation available, she employed both a covert and passive approach and a more covert and active approach during the observational period.

The findings from the cyber-ethnography also illuminated the wider results of the observational research- that despite staff perceptions, most students using floor one did seem to set out with an intention to work. The observations pointed to the space being used as overflow from the lack of group study rooms created by the refurbishment. Groups, pairs and individuals all used the area for work and discussion and the majority of people brought with them equipment needed to study (laptops, notebooks etc.). It seemed that users did not mind the noise level. Some people working alone used headphones where sound leakage occurred, which would not have been welcome in a silent study space and most people spoke at some stage. The only disruptive element of floor one was the gathering of larger groups of ten or more students and even this was not a constant issue as most groups were counted as between three to six students; a predictable size of a group working on a project or presentation.

The other observation made by the researcher that had particular impact within considerations of floor one as a work space was the inconsistency of signage. The researcher commented that floor one **“would benefit from better space definition”** noting that on the same floor there were signs saying ‘Quiet Work’, ‘Work Zone’ and ‘Collaborative Work’ creating an inconsistent message. It was posited that this contributed to staff perceptions of the area as a problem zone as there was no consistent idea of how it would ideally function. It seemed that students understood the floor as a collaborative working area whereas staff saw it as a failed ‘quiet zone’- neither were right or wrong given the signage displayed.

This revelation leads to some final considerations on the research project and its methodology. Ethnographic observation used as a single method can be revealing in observing the unaltered behaviour of students in a space, but it leaves a crucial element out of the picture without being supplemented by research directly interacting with the users. Pairing this kind of observational research with a student survey or even more extensive cyber-ethnographic research would provide the opportunity to more thoroughly explore potential disparities between actual behaviour and perceived behaviour from a student perspective and, importantly, their opinions on what is ultimately their work space.

This additional approach could potentially bridge staff perceptions, observed behaviour and student perceptions to create a triangulated understanding of the study space. However, it is worth noting that even as a single method, the observation produced ideas contrary to some staff opinions and began to create a multidimensional idea of ‘floor one’. It became apparent that although staff felt as though they witnessed all behaviour in the space, often they did not. Since they worked as staff members on Floor One, they inevitably did not actually observe the full range of usage occurring. Since this research, there has been a reinvigorated library-wide reconsideration of zoning and physical design of space informed by the actual use of space witnessed during the observational period. The signage on floor one has also been altered to consistently zone it as a ‘collaborative working zone’- a key recommendation from the research.

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