

The university library website as a virtual study environment

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Abstract

Two trends are emerging in university libraries in the last few years. The meeting place function is strengthened that supports students in studying and working together on assignments. Another trend is the extension of services into the realm of virtual areas. While it is obvious that students tend to use libraries as meeting places in physical means, the virtual study places are not used as heavily by students as expected. A questionnaire survey was designed to explore the attitudes of students towards group work and virtual meeting places in general and their experiences with virtual study environments in particular. There are functional differences between physical and virtual places in studying and different nature of meetings that happen in these contexts. We tried to describe these differences. The results show that the majority of students still prefer the traditional physical library environments for group work. While it is expected to create virtual arenas these “places” seems to remain only supplementary services and can’t replace physical areas. Although many new developments are launched library websites are still regarded as a bunch of services and not as complex study environments.

Keywords: virtual places, library, study place, Hungary, university student

Introduction

University libraries are more and more becoming meeting places where students, researchers can study and work together in appropriately designed physical spaces. This trend results stimulating environments that support community learning, new ideas and maximizing research capacity. (Audunson, 2005) Another trend is the extension of services into the realm of virtual areas. While it is obvious that students tend to use libraries as meeting places in physical means, the virtual study places are not used by as many library patrons as expected (Tóth 2010). Although new web developments make possible different forms of real-time communication it seems that physical study areas can’t be replaced by online ones. There is a clear difference in functionality and patterns of use in these two kinds of study environments.

While the libraries’ online spaces are not so heavily used as meeting places, other specified websites (e.g. designed for booklovers) seem very attractive for young readers (Jávorka 2013; Tóth & Audunson, 2012).

University libraries invest a lot of work into virtual study places to ensure a comfortable environment for their patrons in an online world. New ideas have emerged and new projects have been launched to make possible distance learning in groups in front of a screen. That’s why it is interesting to explore what the students’ attitudes and expectations are towards these arenas. (Beard & Bawden, 2012)

A questionnaire survey was conducted among university students in the fields of humanities and social sciences at University of Pécs. The research aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the attitudes of students towards group work and virtual meeting places in general?

- What are their experiences with working and studying in groups in virtual arenas? How virtual study places are taken into use by university students?
- What are the main patterns of use of virtual arenas for studying? How physical and virtual places are connected to each other? What are the functional differences between physical and virtual places in studying?
- What is the nature of virtual meetings in compare with physical ones?

In this study we summarized the most important findings of this research project concentrating on attitudes towards group work and libraries as virtual study environments.

Methodology

The questionnaire was distributed in mailing lists and Facebook sites to which students of University of Pécs have access. The online questionnaire was available for a month in October 2013. A total of 111 questionnaires were completed and returned. The relatively low number of responses can be attributed to the many questionnaires students are usually asked to complete during their studies. After processing data and creating diagrams we analyzed correlations between demographic variables and the respondents attitudes and views. The sample is not representative but as being relatively homogenous it can attract our attention to certain issues.

Findings

The demographic characteristics of the participants

Our first few questions were related to the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The questionnaire was available for both full and part-time students therefore their age is varying on a very large scale between 18 and 49 years. The average age is 26. The majority (73%) is studying full-time. They are much younger (23 years average) than their part-time counterparts (35 years).

As most respondents are attending the Faculty of Adult Education and Human Resources Development – where the two main subjects are andragogy and librarianship – there is a very unbalanced gender ratio. There are significantly more female respondents (77%) than male (23%).

Most of them is heavy library user. 44% use the library at least weekly, 88% at least monthly and only 4% stated not using the library at all. 74% of the sample is registered user of the university library and 63% in the local public library where they actually live. However as completing the questionnaire was not obligatory it is possible that those who are registered users of one or more libraries are more willingly answered our questions. Library and information science students are a little bit overrepresented in the sample. It can also be a possible cause of the relatively high ratio of library membership.

Our respondent – not surprisingly – heavy internet users too. 98% regularly keep contact with their school mates via internet too, and the same number use internet for learning purposes. 94% have a profile on at least one social network (Facebook, LinkedIn etc.). It was also interesting to ask them how active they are on these social sites. While a tight majority (68%) is interested in others' opinions in forums, but most of the respondents (77%) is not actively shape the flow of discussions. Most students are just lurkers in these online communities and not share their own opinions or knowledge concerning actual topics.

Attitudes toward group work

First we wanted to know generally how open our respondents are to group work. It is also a role of higher education to develop students' competencies that make them able to work in groups. An increasing number of teachers give assignments that should be solved and delivered in small working groups. It is very much depend on students how they feel about these tasks. Some of them enjoy others suffer from such works in which social competencies are as important as professional skills to handle emerging problems.

We asked our respondents to write if they usually study in groups with their mates. Their general attitude toward this form of studying is positive. 59% said "yes sometimes", 8% do it frequently, 24% "never, but they think it would be an effective form of obtaining knowledge", while only 8% thought it doesn't make sense at all. We didn't find any strong correlation between full-time/part-time and attitude toward group (0.14) and between gender and attitude toward group work (0.097).

We also asked our respondents to evaluate on a 1 to 5 scale the following statements: "It is important to have online community spaces for learning"; "The students should study sometimes together and not always alone" and "teachers should give many assignments that require group work". Five mark meant a definite agreement while one referred to a flat rejection. (Figure 1.)

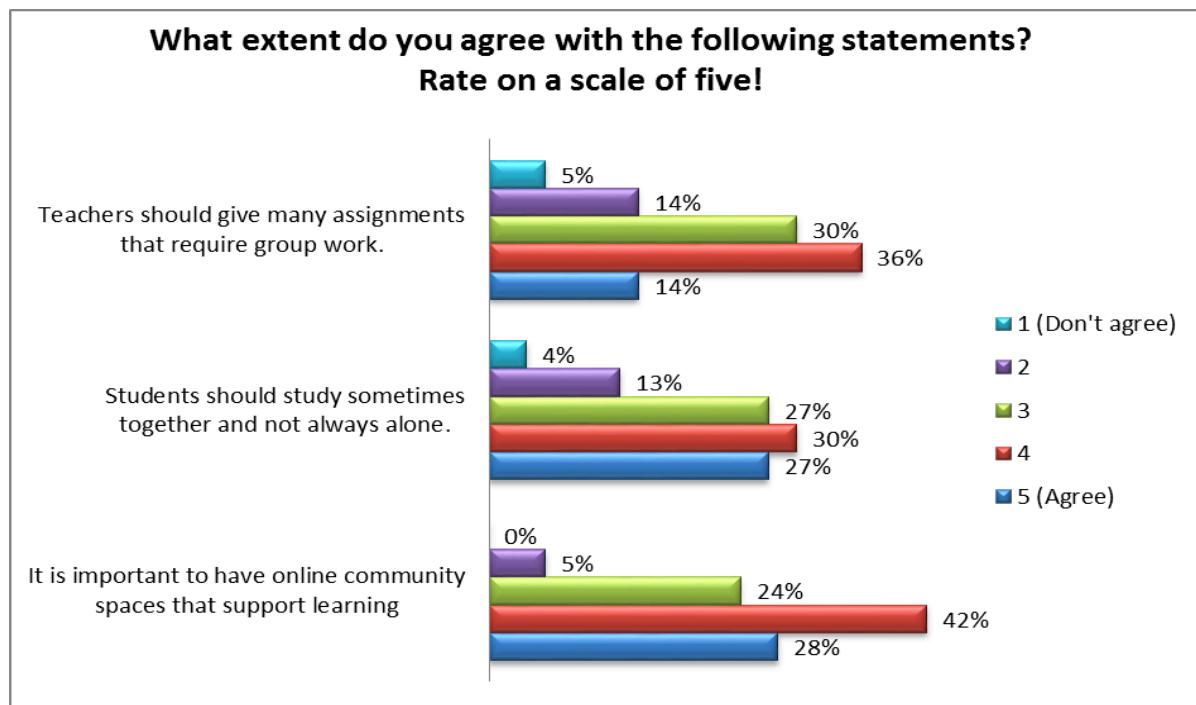


Figure 1.

More than 50% gave "good marks" (4 or 5) to the statements above, but agreement is not obvious according to these answers. Especially the assignments requiring group work is relatively divisive. Data suggest that most students recognized the importance and advantages of studying in groups but they aren't so much keen on getting group work as an obligatory form of accomplish home assignments. They would like to enjoy the advantages of group work but don't want to get their social skills developed by others.

The role of libraries in supporting learning communities

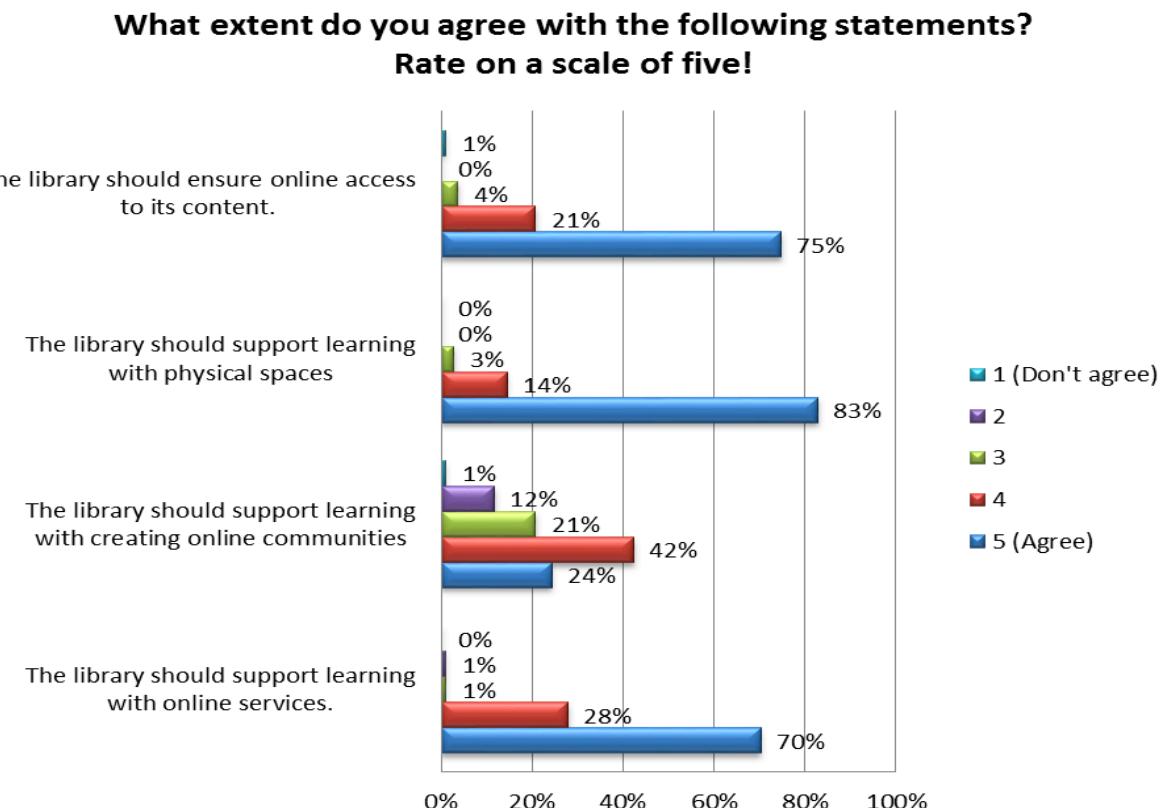
Libraries traditionally offer spaces for learning. In the last few decades libraries tend to extend these spaces in an online environment. While the "library without walls" concept tried to

reproduce traditional services online with offering remote access to documents and data, the realm of library 2.0 is much more about reproducing the library experience in a virtual world. Motivating discussions, random meetings, pleasure of discovery are all parts of this new stimulating environment that libraries intend to realize. Many research projects aimed to discover the libraries' role in ensuring a neutral place for meetings, discussion and active citizenship. One of these was PLACE at Oslo University College (Audunson et al. 2007). In the last few years the same issues in online environment also got into focus.

We asked university students how they feel about library as a place for learning in compare with other arenas. As most of the respondents are registered library users and they also use the library relatively often we could suppose that they have a sophisticated view on library functions and services.

We asked those who usually work together with their school mates where they usually meet. We gave options, but allowed to write anything if their preferred place is missing. Surprisingly just 34% answered that they usually use library places for group work, while 44% use the university building, 35% somebody's flat and 22% the dormitory. Perhaps it is a critical reflection to the spaces that the present library services. The students use the library as a source of content but not as a place for studying.

It was also interesting what they think about the roles of libraries in supporting students' learning activities. Similarly to a previous question they had to evaluate statements on a one to five scale. (Figure 2.) Results show that there is a wide agreement on three issues. 1. The libraries should function as a physical study place. 2. It should support learning with online services and 3. give remote access to content. Our respondents have a much different view on the libraries' role in creating online study circles or virtual communities. Two third of them evaluated this statement with four or five, but contrary to the other three statements there is a strong part of students who think that this isn't the libraries' role.



If not librarians, who should design the or

Figure 2. group work? The majority of our respondents thought it is the students' task (80%). 68% answered that teachers should

elaborate these arenas, while only 44% thought that the librarians can have such a role. We can suppose that students associate from online learning environments to platforms like Moodle which are filled up with content by their teachers, or social networks like Facebook where they can create a closed group for discussing problems emerged during the learning process. It is quite difficult to find an appropriate place for the librarian within this context. Simply we can say that on the one side librarians regard themselves as architects of complex virtual environments where students can study together, on the other side the target group requires simply access to online material.

Discussion and conclusion

According to our respondents' view group work can be an effective form of learning. Most of them like study together with their school mates both in physical and virtual spaces. They use the internet for studying and for keeping in touch with other students too. They have a strong desire for online environments designed for study together but prefer the ones they created on their own or by their teachers. It seems that studying in online groups is much more related to their personal sphere (Facebook, Moodle interfaces designed for certain courses) in compare with areas where a wider audience can appear.

The most important role of libraries and librarians is to ensure remote access to content and data, and they don't expect libraries to maintain virtual spaces for vivid discussions. University students in Pécs appreciate the physical study spaces of libraries and a significant number of them regularly use them, but don't think that librarians should put much efforts in creating virtual study places. There is a consensus that libraries should ensure reading rooms, research areas, places where students can study and work together, but it seems it is valid only in a physical world. While it is expected to create virtual environments these "places" seems to remain only supplementary services and can't replace physical study areas. Although many new developments are launched library websites are still regarded as a bunch of services and not as complex study environments.

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