

LIBRARY AS SHAPESHIFTER

ABSTRACT

Engagement at UTS Library is both a strategy and mindset, it informs the way we build community and support learning and research. Over the past five years, we have modified our approach to engagement and library services by fostering a culture of playfulness, experimentation and risk-taking amongst library staff. We propose that the new rules of engagement lie in shifting relationships with clients and stakeholders from an impersonal and hierarchical model to one that embraces collective creativity, playfulness and authentic communication. This paper discusses how we achieve this by making the invisible visible, re-envisioning physical spaces for imagination and play, using an authentic voice, forming strategic collaborative relationships and supporting library staff in taking on new roles. Our examples will explore a number of current initiatives to highlight these themes through the library's popular Think Play Discuss wall, social media channels and participation in university-wide activities.

PAPER

Introduction

Academic libraries are grappling with the challenge of demonstrating impact and changing service models while some critics question whether there is a future for libraries at all. Those who design successful and sustainable libraries must have a deep understanding of their community as well as active channels of communication. Engagement is critical to building this understanding and achieving meaningful dialogue (Booth, Schofield & Tiffen 2012). At the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), engagement is a high priority for the institution as a whole and as such, the library's work in this area supports both local and organisational priorities.

Over the past five years, UTS Library has modified its approach to engagement by developing a distinctive brand to illustrate a culture of playfulness, creativity and authenticity. This has been achieved by:

1. Making the invisible visible;
2. Re-envisioning physical spaces for imagination and play;
3. Using an authentic voice;
4. Forming strategic collaborative relationships; and
5. Supporting library staff in taking on new roles.

Technology has an important function in mediating our engagement practices, but the central focus remains firmly on people and forging relationships with the UTS community.

Making the invisible visible

As libraries become increasingly efficient at providing services and access to resources, they face a paradox where “the better a library is at streamlining the delivery of content to their users, the more difficult it is for the library to be recognized for the value it delivers in actually providing the resource to the user” (Frumkin & Kessler 2013, p. 324). The Pew Research Centre’s 2013 report on public libraries highlighted another entrenched issue, finding 30% of the surveyed population had little or no awareness of the services available to them (p. 3). A library that is invisible to its community and not engaging with its clients will be underutilised and struggle to demonstrate value to stakeholders. UTS Library’s response to these challenges is to make the invisible visible by creating a cohesive and recognisable brand, providing a consistent user experience through face to face and online service points, showcasing the less visible work that happens behind the scenes and participating in high-profile events on campus.

Library branding rose to prominence in the early 2000s, with examples like ALA’s @yourlibrary initiative in 2001 that focused on marketing services and with the reinvention of libraries as learning commons - where libraries are places of knowledge creation as well as information access. A brand is meant to “encapsulate the essence of a service or a product” (Walton 2008, p. 77), and improves client trust and benefits of the services offered by the organisation (Singh 2004). Tapping into the design expertise available to us at the university, we hosted an artist-in-residence program, commissioning the creation of an image that would form our visual identity that represents the evolving nature of the library. The resulting product was a colourful ‘L’ based on the nets of a cube that is now used across our website, signage and publications (Figure 1). The dynamic nature of the cubed ‘L’ represents the personality of the library as “playful, surprising and delightful” (UTS Library 2013).



Figure 1: 'L' cube represents UTS library's personality and its role in the university

A visual identity is more than just a brand, it represents the culture of creativity at UTS Library. As the library works towards the goal of re-envisioning itself as a library of the future, our goal is that the visual identity will become synonymous with the experience of the library as being a social space where everyone is welcome; it brings the university together as a hub of knowledge, culture and collaboration.

Re-envisioning physical spaces for imagination and play

UTS' campus master plan aims to consolidate and revitalise the university into a single urban campus. Spaces are being redesigned to be 'sticky', encouraging students to spend more time on campus in addition to studying and classes. A 'sticky campus' is defined by Shirley Alexander, UTS Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President, as a

campus where students not only come to learn, but to have “serendipitous encounters with other people from different cultures [and] from different discipline areas” (Stuart 2012, para. 3). The library is about to start a refurbishment project to install spaces that reflect the values of the ‘sticky campus’; spaces that are social, modular and client-focused to better facilitate flexible learning and cross-disciplinary interactions (Booth 2013).

Going to the library, wrote Singh and Ovsak, “is a choice for interaction and inclusion. Whether engaging with the literature, or intent upon independent group work within the library, one is choosing a social space and a social activity” (2013, p.3). The design and use of our physical spaces for stickiness is about building on this intrinsically social element in libraries to foster an active social and cultural vibrancy and cement the library as the heart of the new UTS Campus (Booth 2013). We work to create a social experience of visiting the library that, aside from meeting our clients’ learning and research needs, is delighting, surprising, engaging, serendipitous and inspiring of curiosity (Booth 2013). This is achieved through exhibitions of student works, collaborative activity spaces and collection displays.

Collection displays and exhibitions of student works are located beside a collaborative discussion wall to facilitate serendipitous interactions between clients and pique curiosity about the diverse outputs of their peers. These displays are part of *UTS Library Curations*, a program of themed exhibitions of student works, with associated launch events such as talks and live drawings that generate interest and provide opportunities for social interactions. Situating these displays and activities within the library allows us to expand the user experience beyond a study space; providing a place for those who visit so that they can experience, interact with, and contribute to the cultural life of the university (Booth, Schofield & Tiffen 2012).

Library staff play a key role in creating an environment that fosters engagement with and between clients through shared interactions (Pullman & Gross 2004). Staff from different departments work together to develop our curations program and to interact with students on a collaborative discussion wall known as Think Play Discuss. The 2.5 x 3m chalkboard wall, originally designed by a UTS postgraduate student as part of his research on interaction design, is now managed by staff who write up questions or prompts relating to the *Curations* themes or other current events. Staff provide the stimulus, inviting clients to take ownership of the space and lead the interaction. During semester, the wall is quickly filled with vibrantly coloured clever responses and drawings. The discussions on the wall are then carried over on to social media, creating a continuing conversation across physical and virtual library spaces (Booth, McDonald & Tiffen 2010). The most successful example was our participation in the #IHeartTheReef campaign, as part of the lead up to Earth Hour in 2014 (Figure 2).



♥ 23 likes

● **utslibrary** A huge thank you to the amazingly talented students and staff of #uts for making this beautiful mural in support of #iheartthereef for @earthhourofficial #utslibrary [earthhour_australia](#) It's an amazing piece of art! Thank you @utslibrary and all the students for your support!

Figure 2: UTS Library Instagram post of the #iheartthereef mural.

Using an authentic voice

Physical spaces form an important aspect of the user's experience, but there is also wide recognition of the increasing role of social media in terms of engagement. As Lorcan Dempsey noted, "space is shifting from infrastructure to engagement, as it supports social interaction around learning and research" (2012, p. 11). Like many organisations, we use social media as a key method to communicate with clients. At UTS, we recognise that many of our clients are already users of these services and that this medium holds particular promise for the co-creation of content (Wilcox & Chia 2013). To have a meaningful impact on client engagement, social media channels must be consistent, authentic, believable, and capable of starting dialogue (Briones, Kuch, Liu & Jin 2011; Marwick & Boyd 2011). These characteristics are essential components of the library's identity. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are used to foster dialogue with students and establish an active virtual community. Staff from the Information Services and Communication departments produce informative, lively, entertaining and engaging content that is interesting and relevant to our broader community.

Engagement is primarily about starting conversations with clients. These conversations benefit the library as they are often an informal channel for feedback, where we can quickly solve problems, answer questions and raise awareness. With these factors in

mind, all content and responses to client queries are addressed in a conversational tone, with a focus on being responsive, empathetic and sincere (Kietzmann et al. 2011). We recognise that even negative feedback is an indication that clients want to use our services; we use this information to identify areas for improvement, evaluate the effectiveness of our communication and indicate that we take the feedback seriously (Jaber Hossain 2013). Feedback can include reports of noise in quiet learning spaces, complaints about fines, or even simply to let us know that they are enjoying an activity or library-provided space. Creating the human element of the library's online presence means we engage with topics that interest our community, and we often follow their lead in setting the tone for interactions.

Instagram is our newest social media channel. As 76% of its users are under 34 (GlobalWebIndex 2014), it is an excellent opportunity for us to reach more of the student population. In a little over one year, we have grown the account to over 400 followers. Instagram has proven an excellent tool for framing conversations and messages in a way that is interesting to our clients. Like many university libraries, group spaces and silent study are issues of concern to our clients. Traditional means of dealing with issues of noise and space shortages such as increased signage and more stringent enforcement of rules had met with limited success. Instagram allows us to transform those messages from a public service announcement-style, with connotations of hierarchy and formality in the relationship between library and client, into humorous and fun images (Figures 3- 5). With this more informal approach, we are seeing clients post generally positive content about issues which can sometimes be contentious and unpopular (Figures 6-7). This approach has been extended throughout the library by our artist-in-residence and Communications team with signs such as *'Computers: please don't hog 'em with ya stuff'* (Figure 4).



Figure 3: A text based Facebook post about computer availability from 2010



Figure 4: A student clearly indicates that they will be back soon. 'Computers: please don't hog 'em with ya stuff' sign in the background.



Figure 5: Using images and humour in our signage allows us send even serious messages in a playful way. The responses and social media analytics demonstrate that this has a positive impact on engagement.

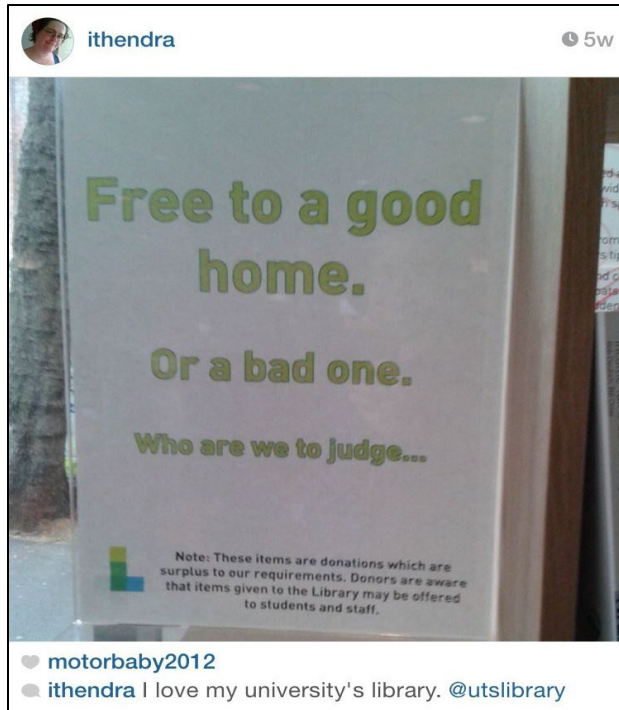


Figure 6: A student shared a photo of the library's 'Free to a good home (or a bad one)' books donation shelf sign on Instagram.

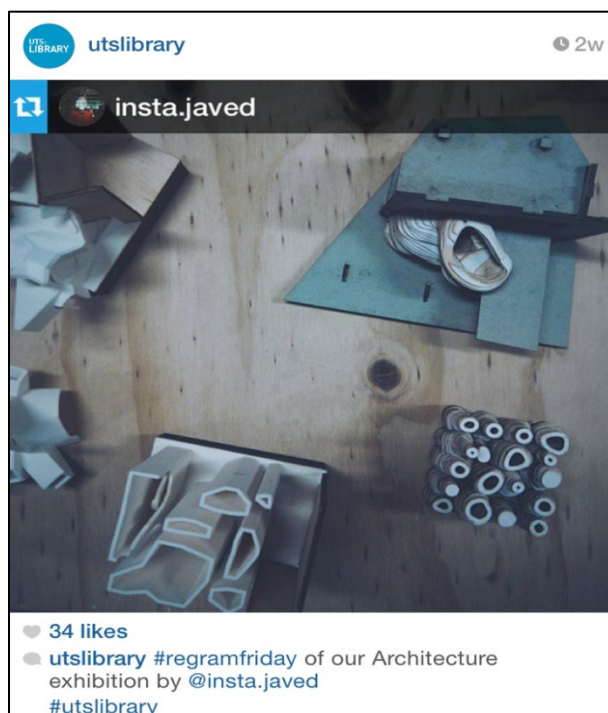


Figure 7: This photograph was taken by a client and is of architecture student's works featured in the UTS Library: Curations exhibition. This photograph was featured as a repost on the @utslibrary Instagram account as part of "#regramfridays".

On both Instagram and Twitter, we encourage clients to start conversations with us by liking, commenting and retweeting or “regramming” posts that are geotagged at our location or that contain the hashtag #utslibrary. “Regram Friday” (#regramfriday) is a regular feature of our Instagram account, in which we repost our favourite client photo of the week (Figure 7). This is an effective method of increasing the number of followers and encouraging more frequent interactions. On Facebook, our follower numbers have increased by 630% between 2010 and 2014, and Twitter has grown 490% over the same period (Table 1).

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
2014	5572	3325	428
2013	4472	2519	-
2012	2279	1677	-
2011	1465	1090	-
2010	792	563	-

Table 1. UTS Library’s social media followers

This increased following on social media has positive benefits not just for the library, but also for clients. For example, during unexpected closures, such as the 2013 flood that led to the library being closed for a week due to lack of electricity supply, we used Twitter and Facebook to provide regular updates about service disruptions and answer student’s questions. Through social media, we were able to communicate important information in a very effective manner, despite the disruptions to core library systems and services.

Forming strategic collaborative relationships

In high-performing institutions, engagement is a shared responsibility, utilising an inter-campus approach to offer high quality, customised programs and services (Kuh 2009). Collaborating with other university departments is crucial for delivering a positive university experience for students, by ensuring they are aware of all the help available to them. In recent years, UTS Library has built alliances with units across the university including the student union, student services, the academic literacies team, the peer mentoring program and careers service. Library staff attend regular working groups with representatives from these bodies, and out of this we have made valuable professional connections and reached new audiences.

UTS Library staff regularly attend working groups such as the UTS Collaborators group which focuses primarily on the social offerings of the university. Attending this group leads to regular opportunities to collaborate with other members on engagement activities. One example of this is at UTS’ Census Date Pizza Party, a social event run by the student services unit as a reminder of this critical date in the academic calendar. The event supports the university’s retention efforts as it brings in the academic literacies team, counselling services and the library, with the goal of highlighting essential support services to students that may be at risk of dropping out. The census date provides an

opportunity for the library to showcase its services and build rapport with students who may not typically visit the library or interact with staff. As the name of the day suggests, the event is primarily social, and our interactions with students are centred around games or quick activities to break the ice as they pass our stall.

Library staff form cross-departmental teams to coordinate involvement in these events, plan the activities, and run the event. These interdepartmental teams, with the shared goal of creating a positive student experience, help staff see that aspect in all of their work, even those not strictly related to engagement. These working relationships have led to further interdepartmental collaboration on other new projects, leading an overall shift away from the traditional approach of analysing things by parts, and moving towards a more holistic approach with a focus on people, community, relationships and collaboration (Davis 2008; Ray 2001).

Supporting library staff in taking on new roles

At UTS Library, the organisational culture is one that embraces change and encourages active participation in projects regardless of seniority. The University Librarian is as likely to be serving pizza during orientation events as much as any other staff member (England et al. 2013). Engagement informs the library's strategic planning process and as such, everyone can participate in our events and activities, including those who are not usually client-facing. Library staff have a range of opportunities to contribute in areas that match their interests and expertise: running events, curating exhibitions and generating content for social media. It is the shared understanding of our aims and values that guides staff in being creative, proactive and willing to take on new projects and responsibilities beyond traditional roles (Kurt, Kurt & Medaille 2010, p. 13; van Beek et al. 2012, p.32; Brown & Vaughan 2009, p. 143). This understanding is reinforced at the library's annual strategic planning days (Sukovic, Litting & England 2011), during staff information sessions and professional development training, where we use games and a playful tone to communicate with staff.

Library staff from all departments are given the opportunity to volunteer to coordinate the library's involvement in the events, planning student engagement activities, and running the information booths. Staff step outside of their traditional roles to develop games or puzzles to facilitate interactions with students, creating a day that is viewed as an overwhelmingly positive experience for all. Through the use of games, we aim to develop a culture of inquiry that reflects the UTS model of learning. Our experiences have taught us that these activities do not need to be new or rely on technology to attract student interest. The games are themed around the library, and allow us to start conversations about newer services such as the Library Retrieval System (LRS), as well as existing services such as our information literacy training and research support programs. It has become a vehicle for wider engagement that raises the library's profile and strengthens our brand of playfulness, while also allowing non-client facing staff to meet the clients that they are serving.

By framing engagement as a part of everyone's role, this has enabled staff to gain a better understanding of their clients and made the work of the "invisible" parts of the library more transparent. Participating in student engagement activities is especially beneficial for staff members whose work involves the planning and design of services,

such as web developers, collection development staff and the executive team. Regularly interacting with students helps staff in non-client facing roles to reconceptualise their work outputs as service-oriented rather than product-oriented (Harrison & Shaw 2004).

Our decision to use staff time and resources for these initiatives feeds back into our strategy to increase the library's presence on campus, and to shift prevailing views about what we do and how we do it. The 2014 Horizon Report highlighted the challenge in the section on disruptive innovation, "library leadership will require radically different thinking to provide adequate and sustainable support ... this type of thinking will need to extend across the entire organization from the top down" (Johnson et al. 2014, p. 28). This is certainly not a new call to action, but our examples demonstrate that student engagement and increased visibility does not necessitate a large budget or extensive human resources; it needs staff who are prepared to embrace these new interactions.

Conclusion

At UTS Library, we recognise our clients as individuals and collaborators, not merely consumers; they are students, researchers, teachers and learners with interests, talents and commitments that go far beyond the university. In turn, we expect our clients to recognise the library in its role as a hub of collaboration, knowledge and culture (Booth, Schofield & Tiffen 2012). The library is creating a brand that reflects these values through its communication strategy, social media channels, redesign of spaces, program of events and many other initiatives. The feedback that has been received online and through library surveys, demonstrate that this message is indeed reaching clients. Our engagement strategy ensures that the library is highly visible, accessible and approachable. We want to improve the UTS experience for everyone in our community.

Through our engagement experiences, we have learned a number of key lessons. Firstly, physical spaces remain a high priority and help define the library as place. Take a closer look at your unused, ignored spaces and turn them into areas for collaboration and conversation as we did with the Think Play Discuss wall. Secondly, successful engagement activities can be very simple and inexpensive such as the games we ran at the Census Date Pizza Party. Creating an organisational culture that fosters this level of staff engagement does, however, require managers that are open to risk-taking and experimentation (England et al. 2013; Tiffen & England 2011). Thirdly, foster positive working relationships with collaborators within your university. We found in developing events that attendance and participation grew when they were co-presented with other support service units. At a higher level, collaboration is crucial to a library's survival, particularly in the face of funding cuts and increased competition for student attention. Lastly, authentic communication underlies everything that you do. Students and staff do not respond well to officiousness and impersonal responses. The evidence in social media clearly points to humour and openness as the way to establish a receptive audience. With a new UTS library building only a few years away, it is more important than ever that we use engagement to develop a deeper understanding of our clients. Through understanding and engagement, we can design the services and spaces that meet their needs and interests both now, and into the future.

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