

New spaces, new learning behaviors; results of an unobtrusive study

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Background

The Taylor Family Digital Library (TFDL) opened September 2011 as the main library on campus. Planning for the new building included expanded student spaces with a mix of seating and technology that offered students an opportunity for individual work as well as collaborative group work. More than a computer lab, and more than a defined space such as an Information Commons, the TFDL informal learning spaces are well used by the students. But what are they doing? Are they using the spaces to support their learning or are they just hanging out?



TFDL 2nd floor computer area

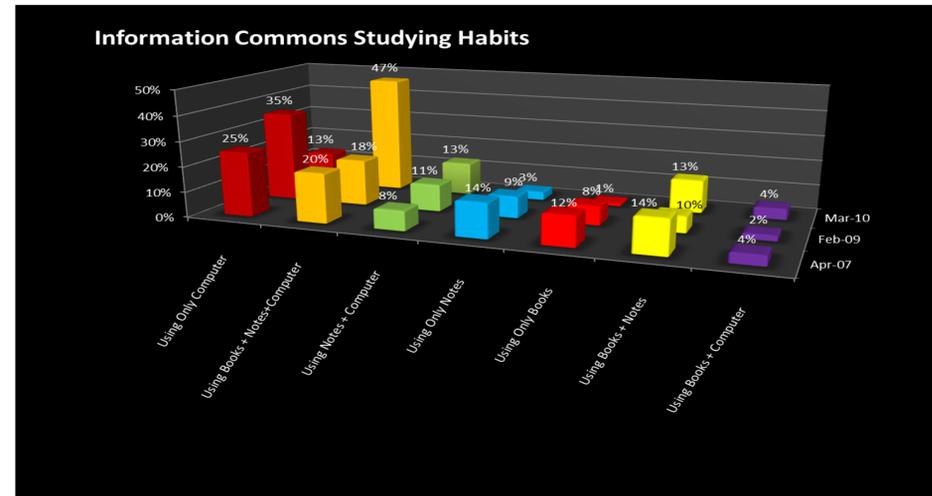
Methodology

Prior to moving to the new library, a number of annual unobtrusive studies had been conducted in the Information Commons in the old library to determine what students were doing and what they were using to assist them in their studies. While the TFDL has been tremendously successful and is often full to capacity, no use analysis had been conducted apart from collecting the normal use statistics. By observing students in the new library and comparing what behaviors/activities might be different or the same in the new informal spaces, it was thought we might illuminate any changes in behavior as a result of our new spaces.

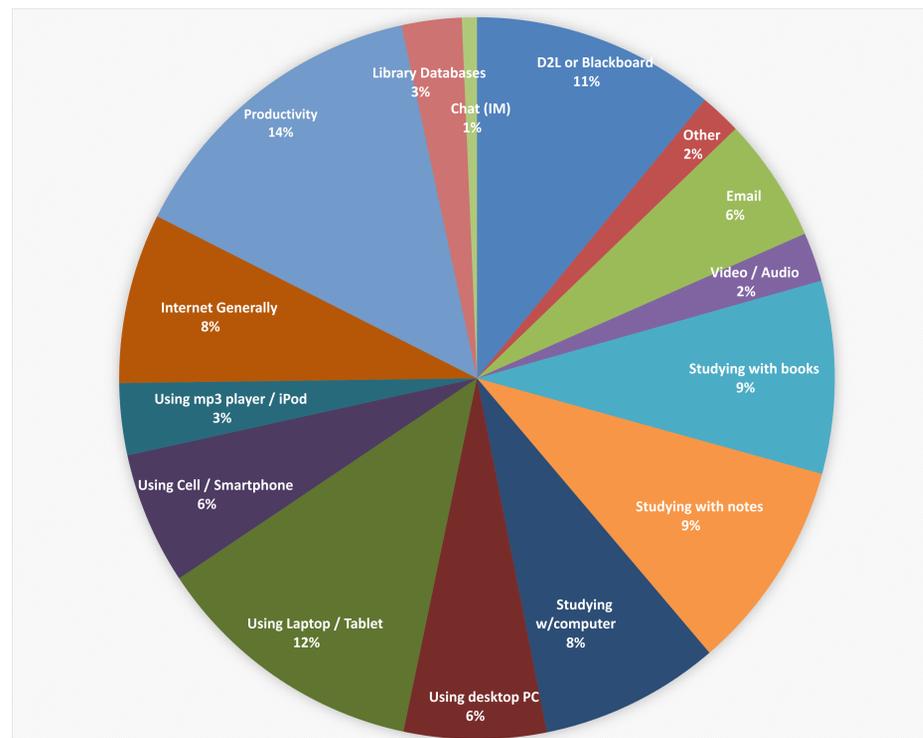
Building on the previous study templates a new template was developed to reflect the new spaces. The study was conducted over 7 days in March 2014 at the same time each day. Observers used an iPad to collect data using SUMA software. Seats were randomly picked and observers were assigned 20 observations minimum at the same time period each day. Once each observation was complete students were asked if they would answer a few demographic questions, identify the purpose of their visit and indicate how long they were usually in the library.

Learning activities

Information Commons 2007-2010



Taylor Family Digital Library 2014



What changed?

- Increase in students working in groups larger than two
- Wider distribution in different areas: tables, lounge areas and study carrels
- Large increase in BYOD: laptops/tablets, decline in mp3/iPod, cell/smartphones no change
- Storage of information is more personal, accessible, ubiquitous: laptop/tablet, phone, cloud
- Fewer graduate students in the new building

What are they doing?

- Increased work within LMS, less use of productivity software
- 79% Studying with books, notes, computer, laptops
- 45% complete assignments; 26% research
- Social networking preferences
 - 2014: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Skype
 - 2010: Facebook and YouTube

Observations

- Students choose what they will do; their learning is intentional.
- Students' preference is to work along or alone
- While there is an increase in group activity it is still small
- There is a need to balance space for working alone, working along and groups
- Space design makes a difference

Questions for further study

- Can we improve our support of learning through better design?
- What are the elements of informal space that appeal to students?
- Why do students choose the space they are in?
- How to foster more group activity?
- How to attract more grad students?