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Fun Precedes Function: Fostering a Creative Workplace in the Public Library

Tony Tallent

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Abstract

The public library is full of creative people. Many library employees flourish in library systems that encourage them to move forward with their creative muses. A scan of the blogosphere quickly proves the public library attracts many creative minds and innovative thinkers to join its ranks. Once they have signed on to serve, what do we do to keep these creative types inspired, dreaming and channeling this creative energy into crafting experiences that benefit our users? What are we doing to consciously create a workplace that keeps fresh thinkers and risk-takers encouraged and empowered? Gleaned from conversations, interviews (both in and outside the library), and the Youth & Outreach Services "Library in Action" blog (<http://libraryinaction.blogspot.com>), this article discusses how workspace affects learning, temperament, production, and creativity in public libraries.

Keywords: public libraries, workspace, design, creativity, library as place

A Place to Create

Much time and thought is given to creating interesting and engaging spaces for public library users. It has become common practice to involve community members in the planning and designing of public spaces in the library. A keen example of this is the work architect Will Bruder conducted while designing the Teen Central space in Phoenix Public Library. Bruder worked for months with a small group of teens to conceptualize the space to meet the needs and desires of Phoenix area teens. What resulted was a useful and strikingly high-design space that had the stamp of approval by its core user group.

But where is the fun in staff workspaces? Remember us? We are the ones who keep the place running. It is easy to venture that there are no Italian ultra suede chairs for meeting with colleagues as there are in the Teen Central space. I doubt that surround sound music fills the staff lounge either.

Why is it that public libraries often fall short in providing interesting spaces for staff to collaborate, to plan, to reflect—to be creative? True, we are the *public* library and our community's needs must come first. That is firm, but staff who work to bring great services to the public long to have spaces that encourage them to explore their own creative natures. Doing so *will* reap benefits for our users.

If poor design choices have left you and your public library staff with mere cubby holes in which to work and create, it is necessary to get creative in order to have a workspace where we can *be* creative. A good dose of fun can turn the plain old functional—very often what staff members are given—into a creative workspace.

Creativity Meets Demand

Recently, I sat on an interview panel in which the candidates were asked to discuss career experiences in which there was no creativity in the workplace. They were also asked how they would fare in a role that offered little outlet for creativity. It was interesting to note the candidates' expressions almost immediately changed after this question was asked. The very mention of having a job with little outlet for creativity brought subtle but noticeable wincing or slightly sad stares.

Unsurprisingly, none of the candidates said that they would be happy working in a job that did not allow for creativity. It does not take a formal study to tell us that most people benefit from tapping into their own creative natures. Dundon (2002), in her book *The Seeds of Innovation: Cultivating the Synergy That Fosters New Ideas*, discusses the importance of creativity to the success of organizations:

If the definition of creativity is “the discovery of a new connection,” then *everyone* has the ability to be creative. Everyone has the ability to connect one idea with another, to find an idea in another department,

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organization, or industry, and connect it with another to solve the challenge at hand. (p. 17)

With this thought in mind, how can we create workspaces that are conducive to discovering connections and creative expression? In most cases, we might need to reassess the spaces we already have to allow for creativity to inform successful work.

Setting the stage for creativity to “happen” often involves some very practical choices and actions that involves bringing in some new things as well as taking away some extraneous flotsam and jetsam that settle in our workspaces. Jason Hyatt (personal communication, February 21, 2008) education coordinator for the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) commented:

In our office we have an ongoing effort to de-clutter and organize. One big change that has taken place as a result is the transformation of the office into a very flexible space. There is enough open space in the center of the room for three tables that form a common workspace.

Hyatt’s reference to a “common workspace” is in line with the idea that creativity involves making connections. By having a common area that is available to all staff a collaborative work community can develop. Such common workspaces allow staff members to have ownership of the space, and it can serve their needs as they arise. Hyatt expands on the topic:

With just a minute or two of rearranging, the office can also be used for trainings, workshops, meetings or other purposes. We are much more likely to bring ideas to the table now (literally and figuratively).

Reducing the visual clutter has also had a positive effect. I find that sometimes I need a clean slate in the office when I am brainstorming or working on a project. That way my mind isn’t competing with all the other visual stimulation around the room.

Hyatt experiences the library as a creative place. For him it is a place of productivity and a place to learn and have fun. This perception is not necessarily held by all members of our work force or by the public we serve. “Book, books, books” is still the most recognized asset of the public library. Those of us who work in the public library each day know that what we offer goes far beyond this traditional idea. Over the years, I have found that there are two general perceptions about what it means to work in the public library. The first can be summed up as “How cool. I love the library!” group. The other is the “Oh. So you must really like books?” group. The creativity of our public library workforce brings joy and learning to thousands of people every day. Are we having fun? In many cases, yes, we are. Still there is much room for “funning it up.”

People join the public library workforce for a myriad of reasons. For some it is because they love working in a direct-service related field, for others it is because of the very information-savvy nature of our business, and for some it is just because it is a stable and meaningful job. All of these reasons are valid. What I have seen through the years—and in a more pronounced way as the Internet has helped

amplify the voices of many library-minded people—is that the public library does attract an abundance of thinkers, innovators and creative types. What do we do to encourage them once they join our ranks? And how do they flourish once they pass into the library employee zone?

Where You Work is Where You Live

The spaces that the community experiences at the public library can be very different from what staff members experience. As libraries move more toward the “experience economy” idea of services and programs, our public benefits from a more welcoming, multi-layered visit to a community staple. Public library staff spaces are generally quite different. While public areas of the library become more flexible, appealing and stylish, library staff are often cramped in small spaces that can barely contain program materials, much less offer flexible spaces for collaboration and innovation-minded experimentation. Whether your library was built to please staff or not, the first key to crafting a creative library workplace is simple: make space to create. While it may not be possible to squeeze more square footage out of a government-issued modular desk or a fabric-walled cubicle hole; the idea is to maximize what you have.

Many people may consider a creative work zone to be one that is filled to the brim with creativity inducing objects—the adult romper room. This can work just fine if each staff member has a private office. When it comes to shared workspace, go minimal. In order to maximize the space you have, minimize items that are not utilized regularly. If you work in children’s services, collecting fun program enhancers is inevitable. Here is a good rule of thumb to remember: if you do not use that aardvark puppet (or any sacred story time collectible) at least four times a year in your programs, find it a new home (likely the rest of your department members are tired of looking at him).

The classic library office workroom is one that can serve many functions. It can serve as a processing station and an ad hoc meeting room. The activity that happens in workrooms is task-oriented and offers little in the way of space for reflection or quiet work. “To make my work environment creative would take four walls, a ceiling and a door. I do my best thinking in a quiet, tranquil environment,” comments Meryle Leonard (personal communication, February 22, 2008), the busy manager of outreach services for PLCMC. Getting that “room of one’s own” that Virginia Woolf encourages us to seek is not always possible in public libraries, especially older ones. Cubicle work environments can give just enough privacy to create an office nook but they do not offer the privacy that many staff members require to feel consistently productive.

Because most of us spend eight or more hours a day in our work areas, I often say that where you work is where you live. Understandably, this idea can be scary to many of us. If we are going to spend a third of our day in an area it really needs to offer us at the very least the basics.

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The next key to fostering a creative workplace helps support staff in feeling ownership and freedom where they work: make practical tools available. Work tools (supplies and equipment needed to get the job done fast and effectively) are tangible items and range from low cost no-brainer office supplies to real investments. Almost every staff member I interviewed for this article mentioned the necessity of dry erase boards, access to plentiful office amenities as well as flexible furnishings. Emily Little (personal communication February 22, 2008), PLCMC program specialist, made a poignant observation when she commented, "I know it sounds trivial, but sometimes it is hard for me to work under fluorescent lights. If we could somehow get softer, less harsh lighting, I think that would help [creativity flourish]."

This is a valid point. Sitting under the blue-white shimmer of fluorescent lights for eight hours is simply no fun. Would you do that at home? Probably not. Once again: where you work is where you live. Small adjustments can make a big difference in how we feel about where we are. Comfort can welcome creativity.

Investing in technology tools to aid creativity helps staff tremendously. Not only is it helpful, technology is also fun! The freedom and flexibility that laptop computers offer to staff is remarkable. In the past year, the Youth & Outreach Division of PLCMC allocated funds for several laptops to be used for staff productivity as well as public learning programs. These laptops have helped change the day-to-day culture in our office. Staff members do not feel bound to their desks. Many of our staff members now set up "mobile work stations" in other library locations between meetings or at the end of the day when it simply does not make sense to drive all the way back to downtown Charlotte. The laptop has become a symbol for freedom and flexibility in our department. As a result, many staff members are experimenting with new applications and online products. Posting pictures of programs on Flickr has become *de rigeur* among many in our fourteen member department.

Where Functions Intersect

Knowing that the reality of "private work space" is not typical for many public library staff, how can we look at combining space functionality into common areas of activity and productivity? Morphing views of reference work in the public library has encouraged discussion of reuse of large reference desk areas. What if the footprint of a reference desk (and there are some mammoth ones out there) were to be recreated to be a work area that could serve our staff, our public and our volunteers. PLCMC's Friends and Volunteer Coordinator, Chauna Wall (personal communication March 3, 2008), suggests that one barrier to success in her field is that the library has "public space and private space but nothing in between for volunteers." Allowing the work of staff and volunteers to spill over unapologetically into public areas can encourage the discovery of new connections that Elaine Dundon writes about. The third key for fostering a creative workspace: merging

work areas. Doing this in a way that is actually viewable *and* celebrated in public spaces has an element of built-in marketing encouraged by innovative marketing-minded experts such as [Seth Godin](#). Using our space as a living commercial for the creative work of the public library is both efficient and filled with the electricity of activity.

Ideas from an Indie-Visionary

Tucked into a restored warehouse complex in the trendy but still gritty Plaza-Midwood neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina is a company that combines style, ingenuity and old-fashioned elbow grease. The results: films, promotions, marketing, art fabrications and installations—general solid creativity. The company: Indievision, the brainchild of Tony Elwood, a wunderkind who has crafted not only a productive design company but a working environment that is slick, memorable and conducive to centering employees' energies and creativity (<http://indievision.com>). Elwood (personal communication March 19, 2008), who is a powerhouse of ideas and activity, modestly says, "I do not specialize in anything." The director and producer of a handful of independent movies began his business in a rundown office tower on one of Charlotte's least attractive streets. Starting with a few buckets of paint and a desire to make an eight hundred square foot space inviting to his start-up staff *and* clients, the end point was an environment that "caused clients and staff to freak out" (in a good way) as they were not expecting to find a colorful and interesting space in an office tower where the elevator doors would often barely shut.

I first met Tony Elwood in his office space several years ago during a project presentation his company had prepared for the public library. The space is full of color and leans toward minimal, industrial-chic design. The staff members who presented were enthusiastic, articulate and reflected the same relaxed yet professional energy of the space. When talking with Elwood about his work and environment, he uses the word *relaxed* quite often. *Relaxed* is a feeling, not a design component. Elwood emphasizes this to his employees and it shows. He does not believe that creating overly playful environments (including offices filled with the arcade machines and foosball tables we heard so much about in the 1990s) necessarily make a more productive or fully fun workplace. "Fun comes from personality, not stuff," he says. Elwood believes leaders who are observant of their staff can find the creative edge within anyone. He believes in building strong teams while allowing individual creativity to flourish.

It was at this point that my thinking on the creative workplace began to change. I expected Tony Elwood to share his ideas on clever design as a productivity driver. Instead he focuses mostly on the quality of relationships within the space—allowing for flexibility, and encouraging camaraderie. It certainly helps that the office spaces were deliberately painted with cool colors—blues and greens—and the

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public spaces with more vibrant tones, but ultimately I sense that none of this would matter without the determination and action of its creative leader.

Looking outside the library walls for inspiration and insight works well. Translating these ideas back into the library workplace can take some real mental gymnastics. Making a more vibrant library experience for all our customers—public, staff and volunteers—makes it worth the flips and turns. Remember the fourth key to fostering creativity: encouraging innovation makes for a creative environment. This often comes from the leader, manager or supervisor. Relax into allowance. See how individual styles of creativity can enhance your work space. This will only work if you mean it. If you are not comfortable with allowing creativity, ask for help. Encourage staff members to share more about themselves during staff meetings. And finally, ask them what would make coming to work more fun. Consider the suggestions of your staff members (a foosball machine is not required).

Keep the Creative Candle Burning

Once you have created as much space as possible, provided the tools, blended areas and rejuvenated your commitment to creativity—what next? Pass the torch. Continue to create ways for staff to lead. There will be times when gentle reminders are needed—some of us tout our creativity more easily than others. Helene Blowers (personal communication, February 23, 2008), Director of Digital Strategy for Columbus Metropolitan Library says, “It’s not the job of managers to say yes or no to staff; it’s their job to create an environment where creativity and ideas are encouraged and supported into meaningful action.” Creativity yields creativity.

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