

User Orientation as an Organizational Principle: the Warsaw Experience

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Warsaw University Library (WUL) was already more than 180 years old, with a traditional and stable organization, when it made its first attempts to bring modern library concepts to a newly-constructed building in December 1999. It was high time for a change. Nineteenth-century, monumental construction could no longer keep pace with those goals established for the university community. Overloaded stacks were partly inaccessible; an underdeveloped local network was permanently overworked; and small reading rooms were inadequate for our growing number of students. Even great commitment by library staff was insufficient to users' requirements and newly-created tasks.

The new building, designed in a modern style and critically acclaimed, created a completely different work atmosphere for users and library staff alike. A fundamental principle of the library's architectural and utilitarian concept was open access: to knowledge; to a wide range of library resources; and to various technical facilities. Last but not least, our idea was to make it a comfortable and gracious place. This contemporary library building engenders a feeling of relaxation and creation open-minded concepts, due to its spaciousness and natural light flaring through immense glass windows and roofs. Users perceive the new library not only as a place for reading, circulating books, or advanced searches to facilitate independent study, but also as an important meeting place for individuals and groups—for learning, discussing, or just being in a group.

The idea of open stacks was created in Poland for the very first time—in our library—for patrons of academic libraries, although this concept has enjoyed a long tradition in Western Europe and the United States. Our librarians recognized free access as a challenge to improve use of resources. For the institution it was an opportunity to focus on users and their requirements, in contradiction to the 19th-century approaches to holdings, acquisitions, and preservation which had dominated in the old building.

The new library image had been created by architects and librarians together, but also users themselves discovered a new role for the library. Fundamental changes in the environment become the chief challenge for librarians and influence modification of library staff's tasks, habits, and library procedures.

The following approaches of changes had to be discussed:

1. Architectural and utilitarian perspective of change
2. Procedures and regulation modifications
3. Human relations after the change
4. Network cooperation

ARCHITECTURAL AND UTILITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

Two levels of the public area in the Warsaw University Library, designed as open-stacks space, cover:

- shelves for one million holdings
- almost 1,000 working places
- a network of over 100 PC's
- 8 self-service copiers
- microfilm stations
- audio-visual equipment
- technical facilities for the handicapped

Open stacks are organized according to Library of Congress Classification (US). Eight main divisions are easily identified, directly from the Reference Hall, by large flags (pendants). Each division collects all types of library resources — monographs, journals and reference materials — in both printed and electronic format. Each division is furnished with tables, desks, arm-chairs, and several PC's; a unified color of light gray blends naturally with the space. Distinctions between divisions are invisible and a patron may work anywhere. The main aim of such an arrangement is not to distinguish any part of the collection — neither printed nor electronic. Our goal is not to impress one way of usage, nor to force any one style. The users have become independent in their explorations.

According to patron choice study carrels and tables are located: close to the windows; hidden among the shelves; in a relatively small reading room (120 seats); and in two group learning rooms. Private rooms are equipped with special technical facilities for the blind and also with audio-visual machines; others accommodate the university faculty only (with or without PC).

The users have been allowed to grow accustomed to the library's environment depending on their needs. Each day the library changes a little from the standard configuration. Some mobile furniture, such as chairs and armchairs, small tables, and standing lamps are perfect for arranging space which suits different individual preferences and sizes of user groups. In spite of some inconvenience, patrons often prefer to sit or lie on carpeting between shelves or in their favorite nooks.

Lack of architectural obstacles on the one hand and special technical equipment on the other, have made the library accessible to all, including those with serious disability. There is adequate space for wheelchairs between stacks; there are many elevators; also many staff are available to help.

The large number of PC's in open areas are readily available to all patrons, which must be described as unique and atypical in Polish libraries. The computers provide access to:

- OPAC (VTLS software)
- CD ROM databases in the university or local network
- Internet resources including: integrator service (SwetsNavigator) and electronic journals (Elsevier Science, Springer Verlag, EBSCO Direct, ABI/INFORM — in total over 5,000 fulltext journals)
- Selected application software (Microsoft Office, Adobe Illustrator)

There is only one practical reason why we did not install all these options on each computer. Distinctions reflected the patrons' level of comfort with network usage. Those who search an item in the library collection and start with OPAC searching use only OPAC computers located close to the Circulation Desk in the Reference Hall. For more advanced searching, combined resources may be used (OPAC+local databases). Such PC types have been dispersed throughout the library, close to the printed resources. The fifty Internet computers most frequently occupied were grouped in 5 locations with easy access. A few PC's with Microsoft Office were installed in a small training room, where they were mainly used as word-processors, although both OPAC and local databases are installed.

PROCEDURES AND REGULATION MODIFICATIONS

Relocating to the new building was preceded by changes in the library's organization: new positions (subject specialists, open-stacks staff) were created; and the Reference Department and the Circulation Department were enlarged and combined into one unit for easier management. Library rules and regulations were not changed, however. The reason was so that we wouldn't force the changes but would be able to perceive, predict, and create changes. Since the situation was new for both, staff and users, some time was needed to set new things in order, to determine limits of user freedom and, to define the library staff's tasks within a constantly flexible situation.

One of the first changes introduced to „The Library's Rules and Regulations” concerned user registration and identification. Registration into one main system for both university and outside users (according to Polish law, WUL is also a public library) was one of the biggest advantages of that modification. It must be pointed out that, for some one-day users or for those who only needed card catalogue research, this regulation became an inconvenience. At the same time, a large group of users accepted our card system for its advantages: a single card is used for several purposes (checking out books; circulating an item from closed stacks to the reading room; registering for PC use; and using copiers and printers in open areas).

Additional staff was employed to supply the Circulation Desk responsible for user registration. A growing number of newly-registered users has forced us to create a new position at the Entrance Hall for initial registration and card validation. Even with these additional related costs, the change has been effective and important for the library, both for security reasons, and for management purposes — to know more thoroughly the population served.

The procedure of early registration (before the patron's first visit to the library) for newly-admitted students simplifies the way to obtain a library card. The next step will be Internet self-registration, which will be available as soon as VIRTUA (upgrade for VTLS Software) is installed.

Just after we opened, we realized that special regulations were necessary for PC usage as there was so much interest in our new technical facilities. Usage of the library's „computer richness” could especially be observed by staff and users, who waited in line. Everyone was interested in clearly-defined access rules. This resulted in some regulations being modified and developed further after a few months of discussion and observation. Use of computers is free-of-charge for all patrons, which is the rule in Polish public libraries. There are no limits for OPAC or other local database searches, but there are some for

Internet use. It is not allowed to use library computers for CHATs, except those sessions previously arranged and announced which are held with interesting and famous people. E-mail and recreational use is limited to half-hour sessions. Reservations are made for all who need Internet for regular searches, for browsing fulltext journals, or for generally searching databases. All rules were created to increase the number of users, to promote use of fulltext searching, and to give them the opportunity to work effectively. Still, the problem of patrons waiting in line for Internet access has not yet been solved, nor do some users follow the rules. Even if some limits are burdensome, we observe that — according to IP access statistics, received from database distributors — the number of searches in fulltext journals with library computers is growing. This means that a balance between recreational and academic usage is maintained.

The most revolutionary changes have been observed in patron behaviors and in the new „culture” of library use. As has already been said, the library environment suggests relaxation, so that patrons benefit from a feeling of being at home. As the „owners” of the library they try to arrange the space according to their needs. In the first year furniture allocation was more frequent, and now we can see less reorganization. Library staff was asked to evaluate these modifications, to find out if the changes seemed permanent or just casual. Arrangements of furniture observed most frequently were formally accepted and staff tried to help users make their places more comfortable. The rule of informality has never been strained. No one has decided to change the organization of the Reading Room or to move PC's elsewhere. Not one idea for relocation, made by a patron, was completely rejected.

Formally, nothing was added to typical library regulations for users. Naturally, silence must be kept in the reading room; mobile phone usage is limited to the cloakroom area; no refreshments are allowed in the library except bottled water; there is no smoking. All these regulations are well-known to library users. New regulations concern new situations such as the following: use of lap-tops, group learning — loud and distracting for other readers, users with walkman sitting or lying on the carpet instead of using chairs; shoe-less feet on chairs or empty shelves, babies carried by a young parent and other atypical situations.

Library staff had been consulted on whether or not to accept such behavior in order to obtain a consensus. This has not been easy, but after long discussions new regulations, for the public area library staff were formulated (not for patrons!). We agreed that everything would be allowed as long as no one disturbed other patrons or harmed our resources. Preservation of library resources had the highest priority: for example, one can read a book while lying on

the floor, but may not leave it lying open with the spine upwards. Special announcements inform patrons about the „borders of freedom”.

Other modifications may be seen as a step backward. One of the biggest advantages of open access — self-service — was not accepted by some individuals, especially by older faculty members. For those few dissatisfied customers, ordering open-stacks books to the reading room or circulation desk was re-established, as well as ordering catalogue searches by phone. Of course, the procedure was nothing new in the library, but it was a surprise to have that task to perform again. Another surprise was that individualized services increased in October when newly-admitted students were first coming to the library. To limit (but not cancel) the procedure of ordering, regular library training has been provided for groups of students and for all those who are interested in learning more about our resources.

We recognize that patrons need more information about the library, its holdings and services, and much more regular bibliographic instruction. Patrons and staff alike need to learn how to use new technologies. This leads us to the statement that the most important task in our new building is learning, teaching, and developing new communication methods between patrons and staff.

HUMAN RELATIONS AFTER THE CHANGE

Our traditional library organization was based on relationships between our highly-informed reference staff and the user seeking information. The new environment changed these relationships. From the users' point of view the library staff is invisible — even if the Reference Desk remains the focal point of the library; and each main division has one or two subject specialists ready to help with bibliographic instruction and practical information. Patrons do not necessarily need staff assistance to get a book. Nor is every staff member as computer-literate as many students; thus, they can not always be as helpful as they would like.

Searching by card catalogue seems to be as complicated for the computer generation as searching OPAC and other databases is for the older generation. The library staff must help students with the best choice of printed or electronic reference resources and with effective search strategies. That's why improving communications skills and teaching methods are a crucial task for subject specialists. To fulfill these goals, subject specialists need to know more about:

- basic and advanced computer use
- use of reference materials, in both printed and electronic format
- spoken and written forms of communication with users.

During the first year after our move to the new building, almost all the public services staff attended several computer courses on basic or advanced level (training starting with PC basic usage, editorial software, PowerPoint Software, and web page creation). New and traditional reference materials were presented and discussed during weekly subject specialists meetings. Library staff participated in several training sessions organized by database distributors in order to learn about new searching methods and additional services. Special training was organized by the Warsaw University Center for the Handicapped to introduce ways of better serving those with severe disabilities. We still expect to add more courses, especially those concerning communication skills and methods of working with users.

The new building and new environment changed methods of communication between patrons and staff. Every day the library is visited by almost 3,000 users; during the „rush” days just before exams there are more than 4,000 users (by way of comparison in the old building there were no more than 1,000 users per day). For that reason, despite individual consultation and help offered as a typical service, the library has had to focus on visual information. As signage we have: flags and highlighted information directing users to subject classes or subclasses; maps of each level — in leaflets and on standing pedestals; and cross-reference marks on the shelves. All these have been carefully planned to supplement individual help from library staff.

Subject specialists and reference staff have been much more involved in editing hand-outs than in individual support and training. At the same time, an electronic version of „hand-outs” exists as well; this approach requires from the staff additional computer skills. Website pages offer the following: useful information about the library, important links, and information on locally-distributed databases. Printed guidelines, on how to use the library catalogue and OPAC, supplement locally-distributed PowerPoint presentation (installed on each PC). All these new tasks in writing — announcements, hand-outs, guidelines — require the additional skills in public services area.

For a large group of users all visual, printed, and electronic materials have offered the only opportunity for them to learn about library resources. According to what we have observed, the most popular searching method is the search for desired material without using any catalogue, but by going through

a certain number of volumes arranged thematically. Free access increases the number of possible search keys, which in turn, may cause certain distractions as readers get interested in other volumes, losing focus; on the other hand, this can lead to very interesting findings. Some searches end with zero results, not because of lack of library resources, but because of ineffectual search methods. As professionals, we want to help students focus on effective searching. Otherwise, even if they have spent a pleasant time at our library, their visit may be considered a waste of time. It is extremely important to identify those users and to focus on teaching them.

Some excellent informal relationships between library staff and patrons, which were created in the old building, only partly survived in the new situation. For example, these relationships were helpful in improving library staff computer education and in cooperating with some organizational problems. In the new building the library user is much more „anonymous” than ever before. Patrons are fascinated with discovering new and creative possibilities. The problem is that, if the user has not enough time to spend and perceives no need to ask staff questions, he may neither learn about nor effectively utilize additional opportunities. Paper and electronic announcements may support, but not replace, individual contacts. Therefore, the library must offer more traditional forms of pro-active help to users. Improvement of group training, specializing in user needs, is one of our plans for the near future.

NETWORK COOPERATION

The major problem for the Warsaw University Library is making information available for all within the university community. This means that we must endeavor to serve, over 50,000 employees and students, in cooperation with 48 departmental libraries. The total number of holdings acquired in all those separate libraries is equal to the number of holdings in the WUL collection (approximately 2.5 million items in the main library and the same number in departmental libraries). Warsaw University is not organized as a typical university campus but functions in various buildings at several locations in the city. Some of these can take a great deal of time to reach by tram or bus. Access to information and library resources is necessary in each place.

Warsaw University Library's electronic resources cross the formal borders of the buildings, being accessible in all departmental libraries, laboratories, faculty offices, and also from private PC's, because we recently added Remote Access Service for the employees and students of Warsaw University. For technical reasons, some bibliographic databases, distributed from the library server

to the local university net, were not accessible in departmental libraries. This needs to be changed.

Responsibility for electronic resources distribution to the university community is divided into the Library and Interdisciplinary Center for Mathematical and Computer Modeling (the ICM unit at Warsaw University), which has at its disposal some high-power computers. ICM's main aim is to offer access to biomedical and science databases to the entire Polish scientific community, including Warsaw University. As of year 2001 ICM has been a provider of Science Server Software offering ScienceDirect on-site, licensed to the Polish Elsevier Consortium. Our plans are to integrate into one database additional fulltext journals (based on consortia of Academic Press and Kluwer journals) to simplify and improve access. For several Polish libraries the idea of consortium purchases has been the principal reason for closer cooperation in developing acquisitions policy. Users of the Warsaw University Library have also observed effects of this cooperation. WUL also participates in other consortia to improve our collection (LINK — Springer Verlag, ABI/INFORM, and EBSCO/EIFLE Direct)

Still, the term „library” in Poland suggests, first and foremost, printed books, periodicals, and catalogues. The problem is that printed resources have specific boundaries; to close these limits, we must have better ways to inform patrons about all resources; we need better access to union catalogue, which allows greater circulation. Warsaw University has an incomplete union catalogue; WUL library card is not accepted in departmental libraries; and each library has different circulation rules. The autonomy of the university departments and units is the main problem we must face while organizing cooperation between all libraries for a greater good. Still, the Warsaw University Library strives to unify procedures through better cooperation and through faster development of its union catalogue. This seems to be our most important goal for the near future.

Magnificent changes of the Warsaw University Library have had to be supported — by both technical changes and psychological adaptations in departmental libraries — in order to recognize the library environment at Warsaw University as a unique user-oriented system. The new image of the Warsaw University Library has become the first step forward for the further modifications.