Playful Engagement as Serious Strategy

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The knowledge environment has changed significantly over the past several decades. A paradigm shift influenced by postmodern ideas, changes in the understanding of information, learning and authority, and the emergence of digital cultures, have all contributed to a deconstruction of universities as towers of authoritative knowledge. Likewise, libraries are no longer the most important collections of information resources and librarians are not the gatekeepers of trustworthy information Today we have technologically savvy users, with sophisticated skills, higher expectations and who independently navigate digital resources, rarely expressing a need for personal assistance.

The role of physical libraries and librarians in this new information environment has been increasingly unclear. In discussions about the future of libraries, a number of voices point out that libraries still have their place in new environments, but librarians cannot keep walking in the familiar paths, cautiously tweaking what they had traditionally done. Instead, libraries must recreate themselves as courageous, flexible, nimble and responsive organisations embracing continuous innovation; importantly, they must promote this image to the outside world [1-3]. Academic libraries in particular cannot afford to ignore paradigm shifts, it would be impossible even if they wanted. If nothing else, a growing number of academic and library staff acknowledge this changing environment and do not see sense in playing only roles of custodians of traditional authoritative knowledge.

Engagement within library, academic professions and with the outside world emerges as a critical part of new roles which knowledge institutions must adopt. Contradictory as it may appear, providing time and space for playfulness is particularly effective, though not the only path to 'serious' engagement. Pamela Meyer [4 (p.xviii)] argues that by transforming the workplace into a playspace - an open, dynamic and creative space - organisations will be able to 'think creatively, question old assumptions, respond effectively to the unexpected, and engage all participants' talents in collaboration'.

Whilst the use of play to foster creativity may seem axiomatic in some organisational settings, it is increasingly recognised as a powerful strategy in top performing companies around the world. One does not need to look hard to see examples of knowledge economy players like Google and Facebook, whose workplaces embrace the idea of play and whose staff are encouraged to 'play' on their own personal projects at work. In industries where creativity is paramount such as product design, research, and also in information management, 'creativity is the requirement ... and this is where play becomes important, not as the point at which work stops, but as the point in which work originates.'[5 (p.115)]

CREATING A CULTURE OF PLAYFUL ENGAGEMENT

As part of preparations for a new building in 2016, the University of Technology, Sydney Library (UTS Library) decided that one of its priorities is to reimagine the services, facilities and staff, not just to serve the needs of the university student in 2016, but for the foreseeable decades ahead where the only certainty is change. During 2010, library staff used opportunities to explore issues related to its future outside formal organisational forums. The first of these opportunities was the Library's annual strategic planning, where staff involvement throughout the process replaced more traditional approaches. Notably, principles of playful engagement to stimulate creativity and innovation amongst staff in a group setting were used. The intriguing and largely positive results of our Planning Day experiment inspired the library to extend participatory design to a school outreach program dubbed Clients of the Future, in which students of a local comprehensive high school, all members of the school newspaper team, were asked to help us plan for our Library of the Future by imagining their 'school newspaper of the future.'

The Library Strategic Planning Day and the Clients of the Future were projects with different goals and participants' profiles, but they were both designed to enable engagement, and foster creativity and intellectual curiosity. Based on hermeneutical understanding of genuine conversation through play [6] and the idea of 'imagineering', activities were designed to promote participants' engagement in open-ended conversations about the future of their knowledge-oriented work. A range of materials and digital tools were used as aids in building conceptual models and focusing participants' observations. Surprise and playfulness promoted openness and creative responses.

Despite many differences between library staff and high school students, the vision for the library of the future emerged remarkably clear. We listened to outward-looking people who want open communication, inclusive and flexible work settings, and who are mindful of their natural and social environment. Although they like and want to use technology, the physical space and face-to-face interactions were important to them. Particularly remarkable was their genuine interest in their work and the results of their activities. Both projects resulted in a range of good ideas and achieved their goals, not the least being a feeling of excitement and positive energy.

Whilst play and informality are not a 'one size fits all' panaceas to productive group work or engaging staff, they were particularly well suited to the needs of our 'library of the future' projects – situations in which people were encouraged to imagine without constraints, and to express themselves in a setting free of value judgement and critique. In discussing the process and the thinking behind the design of both Planning Day and Clients of the Future, as well as other related UTS Library initiatives, this paper aims to use theoretical discussions and organisational experiences about play,

group work, and the role of the postmodern library to discuss questions such as: What role can play and playfulness take in today's time and resource stretched educational workplaces? Does it encourage creative thinking? Does it set a positive tone to induce collaboration and provide a safe place to air ideas? Can it open up new dialogues with clients and stakeholders? What is the potential role of social media in assisting such aims? And finally, what does this sort of engagement mean for carving a place for libraries in new knowledge environments?

In attempting to provide some answers to these questions, this paper outlines the design process behind each event, the conducting of the activities, feedback from the participants and lessons learned. It is hoped these lessons might provide some insight into the usefulness of play in fostering creativity, which would help libraries and knowledge institutions to thrive in the fast changing world.

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