

Tartu University Library as a medium between different patrons

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Abstract: 12 semi-structured interviews with faculty members of the University of Tartu in order to start generating a grounded theory about the academic library's communication with different patrons. What is the meaning of the academic library for faculty members and how they perceive the issue of availability of reading materials proposed for students are the main research questions discussed in this paper. Additionally, some attention has been paid at current alternatives of making compulsory reading materials available for students.

Keywords: academic libraries, faculty-library collaboration, collection development.

1. Introduction

The paper is about the relationships between the various university faculty members – teaching and research staff and – university library. Besides being a supporting facility for University of Tartu, the University of Tartu Library (UTL) should also be viewed as a medium between two important patron groups: faculty members and students.

In this paper I will at first take a glance at theoretical aspects and previous studies concerning faculty-university library relationships. I will proceed, paying attention on methods of ongoing research. Last but not least I'll introduce the faculty members' attitudes towards university library and explore the integration of compulsory reading materials into particular courses.

The theoretical axis of this work is relying on symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969): *i.e.* how faculty members perceive the meaning of university library while interacting with other people and how they build up their „communication strategy“ with library according to this meaning. The communication strategy of faculty members itself is analysed by looking at how faculty members select compulsory and recommended literature for students.

According to Osgood and Schramm circular model (McQuail & Windahl 1993: 19) the communication process between acting parties is understood as an endless array of identical functions, namely encoding, decoding and interpreting. The communication between faculty members and librarians presupposes same functions (of the university library, see figure 1). It is the

mutual nurturing of the meaning „university library“ that takes place every day even if we all (faculty members, students, librarians) don't notice it.

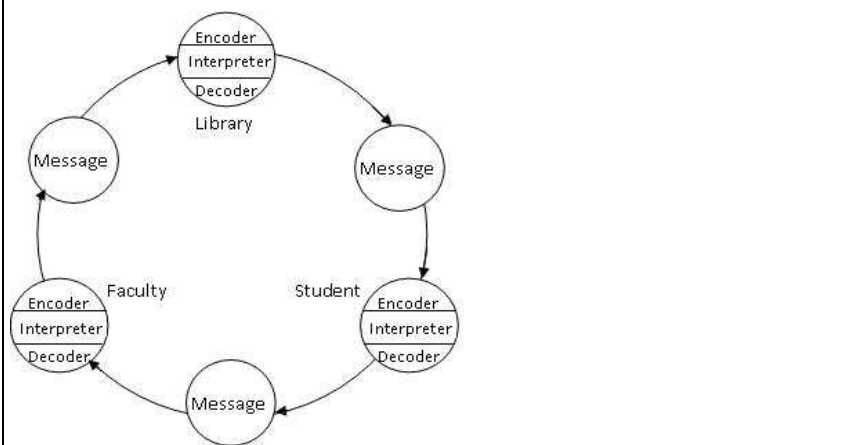


Fig. 1 Further development the Osgood and Schramm circular model

Lots of publications concern the (changing) role of librarians and information literacy – these are subjects that also may deal with faculty-librarian *or* student-library relationships and that are been very widely discussed (some of the most recent ones include Ghosh (2009), Saunders (2009), McAskill (2008), *etc.*). But what happens if we deal with those parties simultaneously, positioning the university library between faculty members and students?

A thorough overview on faculty-librarian relationships by Paul O. Jenkins (2005) has been issued, concerning also the role of faculty members in collection development and working together in information literacy. Also a few years ago, in 2006, on IATUL Conference, Peter Stubley introduced activities performed under aegis of „New Partnership“ in the University of Sheffield Library. Those works prove that the academic libraries have taken a new course – from service provider to a partner. But this is the point of view of the librarians. As Jenkins referred, faculty members are needed to be „convinced of the importance of information literacy“ (2005: 64). If the faculty members do not take information literacy for granted as librarians do and their views of participating in university library's activities is somewhat different than librarians', then maybe there's sometimes a need to take one step back and look back on the meaning of the academic library from the point of view of a faculty member.

Current research context is looking at University of Tartu Library (founded in 1802) that is the largest academic library in Estonia. Additionally, there are over 30 specialized libraries of different faculties, institutes, chairs and research centres of University of Tartu.

According to the philosophy of collection management in UTL, one circulating copy of a textbook or a monograph used as a textbook is acquired for every five students (Rahvusteavikute eksemplaarsus..). „Nevertheless the needs of faculty and students are taken into consideration. If a new curriculum or research area is emerging, the library has to react to the changes flexibly and provide the needed information. At the same time, interdisciplinarity makes the situation complicated as acquisition guidelines based on Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) cannot cover all needs of library users.“: Schwede (2006).

2. About the research

The first goal of my research is to study the meaning of university library through the eyes of faculty members. The second goal is to explore the availability of compulsory and recommended literature for students of University of Tartu. Further empirical section will be organised through the research questions and will first look at how much are faculty members counting on university library while providing students with lists of reading materials. I will conclude looking at how integrated is the compulsory reading material into particular courses; can or cannot students manage without it.

Gathering data for my paper took place in the beginning of February until the beginning of March as 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty members of 4 different subject areas: *realia*, *humaniora*, *medicina* and *socialia*.

Respondent	Subject area	Number of courses (in Fall 2008/Spring 2009)	Total time (in years) of being a faculty member and giving lectures
R1	<i>Medicina</i>	6	44
R2	<i>Socialia</i>	6	16
R3	<i>Socialia</i>	16	3
R4	<i>Medicina</i>	17	14
R5	<i>Humaniora</i>	10	20
R6	<i>Socialia</i>	7	16
R7	<i>Realia</i>	8	9
R8	<i>Medicina</i>	7	17
R9	<i>Humaniora</i>	5	8
R10	<i>Realia</i>	1	2
R11	<i>Realia</i>	12	17
R12	<i>Socialia</i>	13	10

Table 1 Brief descriptions of respondents (Data about the number of courses is obtained from the Studies Information System ÖIS)

The selection from the population of faculty members based on the representative characteristics (so the faculty members were not selected randomly). Embracing different subject areas was first of the criteria for

finding appropriate respondents for interviews. Another important aspect was whether the respondents taught students or not: it helped to include different faculty members from research fellows to professors. During the respondents' selection process another criterium, experience, also emerged – so the total time of being a faculty member was also taken into account.

The transcripts of interviews are analysed to start generating grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998). For providing more reliability to this research, the outcomes of the interview are complemented with juxtaposition of lists of compulsory reading materials (with permission from all respondents) with data from:

- Estonian online public access catalogue called ESTER,
- ÕIS (Studies Information System of University of Tartu where some digitized articles and chapters are preserved) and
- available scientific databases for University of Tartu.

3. The results

In the context of University of Tartu, the university library is perceived as an important supporting facility. In case a faculty member has had some kind of contact with any research fellow from UTL, he or she also paid little attention to UTL as research & development facility. The main building of the library is seen as a studying and meeting place, but mostly useful for students. Some faculty members had lots of nostalgic memories about UTL (from times they were students of University of Tartu) but today they all have remained at a distance from the main building. However, the specialized libraries either of faculty member's faculty, chair, institute or research center are used often (due to proximity, specialized collections, librarians familiar with same research area) and University of Tartu Library is seen as an invaluable access provider to databases of scientific, technical, medical and social science literature.

While preparing a list of compulsory reading the faculty members are generally keeping in mind the accordance of reading materials to the curriculum and if possible, are relying on their decades-long experiences – but the availability of the publication (in library, on one's own shelf) is also a noteworthy issue. One cannot include publications that are not available for students, to the compulsory reading list: it is obvious, *matter of the competency of faculty member* (R2) or *even unethical* (R8), they say.

A paradox in case of bachelor students was emerging: although the faculty members may want to provide them with best available reading materials that are often also used in "high-ranked" universities, the susceptibility of a student may set its limits. Students are not used to read or they have not got much time to read (as lots of them also have a job) so they prefer to rely on conspectus that is provided during a lecture – fortunately in relatively many courses it is sufficient. There are so called fans, of course, young enthusiasts, but according to interviews they form a minority among others. For bachelor students, the

extent of lectures and independent reading may also vary in different curricula. Students in open university, master students or PhD students seem to have higher motivations for studying and for them the proportion of additional reading materials (be they compulsory or recommended) is also considerable. The issue of lack of time seems also to be less problematic in case of elective courses – as choosing these courses bases on the free will of students and the faculty members are usually providing students recommended reading materials rather than compulsory reading lists.

Without question, the faculty member is seen as the compiler of the reading list. Some of the faculty members I've interviewed showed interest towards possible assistance from librarian in matters concerning information distribution: like making photocopies or electronic files in PDF format, looking for publications that some of patrons have forgot to return, retrieving books from repositories to the “shelf of course pack” or gathering and notifying about relevant offers of new books from publishers to the faculty members. The latter is especially useful *if a librarian* (mainly in the specialized library) *is familiar with the “profile” of the faculty member* (R12) and can therefore identify publications that might be relevant to the faculty member. Being alumnus or alumna of particular research area (but not necessarily of library and information sciences) might be also an advantage, but about the level of education the opinions of faculty members again varied. Some proposed that the librarian should have at least bachelor degree, some faculty members, on the contrary, would prefer a librarian who is at least a PhD student in relevant field.

Tasks of a librarian mentioned in previous paragraph might refer to downgrading the role of a librarian to a position of an assistant or secretary. But it is necessary to emphasize that these were the activities that were considered supportive while preparing a reading list. Discussing about the general concept of “competence of a librarian”, the faculty members pointed to different skills and virtues that have been almost traditionally valued among librarians as well. It is important that a librarian had professional knowledge about librarianship: that includes orienting in bibliographic records, skills of using *different programs* (R3) and databases and quick response to queries (that was the quality mentioned most often). Kindness, helpfulness, empathy and generally good communicating skill were mentioned as virtues of a librarian as a good partner for the faculty member. From librarians of specialized libraries, well-orienting in home library's collections is also expected.

While conducting and analyzing the interviews, an issue of the extent of following marketing rules in a university library became important question. On one hand university library should be an active service provider *that pays attention at different target groups* (R2) and acts as a *meeting place rather than sanctuary* (R3). But there's also the *status of a university library* (R4) as universities have always had libraries. It may happen, as one of the faculty

members claimed, that *if the library is seen among faculty as a customer service provider rather than equal partner with mutual goals, this concept may start spreading also on the university as a whole as in some sense the students perceive the university library and university as an integral whole* (R12).

Before dealing with availability of reading materials I would also like to introduce shortly practical suggestions of faculty members that were revealing during interviews. Some of these were quite personal or perhaps even hardly practicable like maintaining a *small gymnasium in library* (keeping in mind that "*Mens sana in corpore sano*") (R3). But *keeping university library opened all summer long* (UTL has usually been closed in July) (R5) or *collecting links of open access video lectures* (R7) are undoubtedly worth (re)considering.

It is obvious that a university library cannot provide necessary copies of printed textbooks or monographs for each student. Therefore faculty members have proposed either through the cooperation with library or without it different ways to make textbooks' contents available for students:

- lectures and in case of lack of time, additional conspects (handed out or e-mailed),
- rotaprint editions,
- „course packs“ that include relevant books or copies of chapters and articles (making copies and retrieving books from repositories has usually been a task for librarians as mentioned earlier) have proven to be very useful before implementing Studies Information System ÖIS some years ago and are used in some institutes,
- photocopies „on demand“ (usually initiated by students in case of lack of printed textbooks or rotaprint editions),
- scanned chapters (or saved e-articles) in Studies Information System are most often used today. ÖIS enables faculty members to make reading materials available either for users of ÖIS (that is for Tartu University students and staff) or for subscribers of particular course. It is also possible to remove the reading material from ÖIS (or make it inaccessible) when the particular course is over,
- web-based courses in the Blackboard learning environment,
- video lectures (service provided by the Multimedia Center of Tartu University) were found especially useful in case of technology-oriented courses or guest lecturers.

When students start to work on their research projects, they are also introduced different databases of scientific literature. In some cases it is done by faculty member as supervisor of the research project, but seminars and courses about using different electronic information sources (relevant web pages and free databases in the Internet, databases accessible in computer network of Tartu University) were also mentioned. Those courses were prepared and lectures were delivered by faculty members not librarians although there is also a web-based course „Basics of information literacy“ developed by subject librarians

of UTL (my colleague Vilve Seiler will introduce it on QQML 2009).

It is necessary to note that there is a considerable difference between compulsory and recommended reading materials. It is found sufficient if there are at least 1-2 items of a publication from recommended reading list in the specialized library. As some faculty members are experts who teach specific disciplines for smaller groups of students, the problem of interdisciplinarity mentioned in the introduction is not acute for them. If necessary, they also apply strategies mentioned earlier. So the juxtaposition of curricula with OPAC is a relevant issue in case of interdisciplinary courses where compulsory reading materials are proposed.

Juxtaposition of syllabi and OPAC ESTER, Studies Information System and databases available for University of Tartu has shown that at the particular time of year (before the exams sessions) the compulsory reading materials are well available. There are plenty of copies either for loan a book for use outside the library or at least some for local loan. But by default every academic librarian can predict that the need for some books will be increasing during the exams session. So – to the contrary to my tentative assumption a further analysis of the loans of compulsory reading materials is needed, using data from the circulation mode of ESTER.

4. Conclusions

The interviews lead to an assumption that although the faculty members generally value the role of university library they are not always ready or interested in sharing same enthusiasm about „new partnership“ with librarians as their attitude towards university library may be formed during long years when the ideas of meeting faculty members' needs from behalf of university librarians were also in development. A faculty member creates her or his own strategies for coping with current situation and if these ways work sufficiently well, there is seen no need to change the strategies. Therefore, while proposing ideas (like personalized bulletin of new books, leaving a trace about scarce item in OPAC *etc.*) the librarian should have a pretty good argumentation on behalf of these.

As if upon a hidden agreement, during the interviews the faculty members also commenced to reveal their attitudes towards books. Although there is not much space to discuss this observation, it might affirm the notion that the roles of the library and librarian are perceived in connection with the importance of books and other printed materials. It is somewhat threatening as important electronic information resources (especially for faculty members) are mediated to patrons via university library. It as a sign of quality if information is made available as if using a magic wand, but it shouldn't mean undervaluing the role of the academic library or competence of academic librarians.

An advantage of conducting semi-structured interviews was that the author could interview faculty members herself, without using any assistance and pose

additional question according to the „path“ of the conversation. According to expectation it helped to collect data rich in nuances.

Research activities introduced in this paper have so far focused mostly on faculty members' perceptions of university library and the availability of the reading materials (be these compulsory or recommended). In order to gain as realistic picture as possible of the meaning of the university library, views of its librarians (especially subject librarians and acquisition librarians of UTL) and other patrons – students need to be added. As already mentioned, additional analysis, using circulation mode of ESTER needs to be conducted in order to reveal the availability and loan frequency of different publications proposed by the faculty members. The analysis would be useful for detecting „bottle-necks“ perhaps even at the level of a particular publication.

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