This paper presents a review of the professional discourse regarding the evolution of information and learning spaces in academic libraries, particularly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It investigates the evolution of academic libraries and the development of learning spaces focusing on the use of the terms which have evolved from the information commons concept. The literature review is primarily guided by an effort to make clearly visible the connections and distinctions between different models for the use of space in academic libraries for delivering information and learning services, up to the very recent occurrence of “maker spaces”. Attention is given to the language used to describe the different models and to changing historical factors, purposes, pedagogical influences, and attributes of each model for better recognition of shifts and emerging trends.

**Keywords:** information commons; learning commons; academic libraries; learning spaces

### Introduction

The nature of tertiary education is undergoing massive change as the twenty-first century progresses and with it also the nature of academic libraries. While the outcomes of the changes are as yet unclear, professional literature offers some consideration of the changes being undertaken and some glimpses of the future. One of the changes occurring in academic libraries is the use of space to support both the library’s activities and the mandate of its parent body, sometimes in competition with other stakeholders in the academy.

The latest development in academic, and other libraries, is the introduction of “maker spaces”, defined as “collaborative learning environments where people come together to share materials and learn new skills. Makerspaces are not defined by a specific set of materials or spaces, but rather a mindset of community partnerships, collaboration, and creation” (The Library as Incubator Project 2013). This very recent occurrence is only beginning to appear in the literature and is beyond the scope of this paper but it provides further evidence of the evolutionary nature of library space in terms of both usage and the language employed to define it. With the developing lexicon used to describe what is happening in academic library spaces comes issues of definition and common understanding. This paper aims to present a discussion around the use of the terms “information commons”, “learning commons” and “learning spaces” and the meanings associated with each as they have developed over time, both semantically and physically in academic libraries.

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Problematic definitions
The terms “learning spaces”, “learning commons”, and “information commons” have often been used interchangeably within the arena of library and information management discourse and in practice in academic libraries. This interchangeability reflects the evolving nature of these concepts but also acknowledges that each shares some common features with the others. Lippincott (2009, 18) suggests that, “The concept of an information commons is slippery – it means different things in different institutions – and there [are] no commonly accepted definitions among those who manage information commons or those who study them”. While Lippincott argues that differing library spaces get conflated under the information commons umbrella due to a lack of definitional consensus, Milewicz (2009, 14) believes this is inconsequential, because “a library by any other name is still a library”. Milewicz (2009, 6) expresses misgivings regarding the use of labels for representational purposes, arguing that features are more important as it is these that indicate a certain philosophy related to purpose. Harland (2011, xiii) agrees: “Whether you call it a learning commons, an information commons, a research commons, a media center, or a library does not matter”. For Harland, what matters is that the information and learning commons provide a common goal – a centralised information service and assistance hub to meet the research, teaching, and learning needs of the wider university community.

Lippincott, Milewicz and Harland do not suggest that academic libraries have remained unchanged since the information commons model emerged in the mid-1990s. Rather they argue that changes in academic library models since this time do not signify a fundamental break from the information commons concept. Milewicz (2009, 11) states that: “Rather than signalling a shift in direction, the recent attention to learning [in academic libraries] heralds a re-dedication to the partnership and philosophies on which the information commons was founded”. However, as library spaces evolve it should be anticipated that the terms used to describe those new spaces will also change. Thus the varying appellations that Lippincott (2009), Milewicz (2009) and Harland (2011) believe to be synonymous with information commons may instead be evidence of library spaces whose changing arrangements represent a progressive shift from the information commons model.

Historical context
The first iterations of the information commons emerged in academic libraries in the mid-1990s (Beagle 1999; Heitsch and Holley 2011; Sullivan 2010) with the advent of the World Wide Web and the influence of new advances in information technology (IT) on the way people exchanged and accessed information. Demas (2005) acknowledges that during the early days of the IT revolution many believed that digital information available on the Internet would gradually replace books, leading to “deserted libraries” (Demas 2005, 27). However, in response to this fear, this professional existential crisis, Bonnanda and Donahuea (2010, 226) argue that the “libraries as space movement began”.

A number of writers suggest that the primary definition of the information commons is that of shared physical space (Smith 2011; Somerville and Harlan 2008). This sharing typically brings together the library reference space and the IT services, which in the past have been quite separate. Another approach suggests that the information commons is not only a reformulation of the physical space but also the conceptual space in response to the need to adapt to changing digital access and research methods (Remy 2004; Sullivan 2010). While the idea of the library space as a teaching and learning environment has
always been part of the academic library ethos, the development of the information commons has enabled this idea to be developed to include not only information provision and instruction but also research and IT assistance in a more integrated way (Sullivan 2010). Bennett (2009) suggests that the development of library space involves fundamental changes to the way that librarians and IT staff collaborate and that these partnerships offer new and different instructional opportunities “teaching moments” for library staff.

In the early 2000s, the learning commons model started becoming a topic of interest in Library and Information Science (LIS) literature. In 2003, Bennett proposed that the learning commons model could chart a new direction for academic libraries. Bennett perceived that the learning commons model would complement new teaching and learning pedagogies in higher education which had shifted “away from a teaching culture and toward a culture of learning” (Bennett 2003, 10).

The new teaching and learning pedagogies in higher education were influenced by social constructivist learning theories (Matthews, Andrews, and Adams 2011) and self-discovery learning practices. These theories upheld the notion that, “the most significant learning takes place when individuals participate in social learning activities” (Matthews, Andrews, and Adams 2011, 12). A learning commons facilitated this.

Sullivan demonstrates how academic libraries evolved to reflect these new teaching and learning directions:

For the past decade, change in academic libraries has paralleled the re-orientation of knowledge in higher education. Recently, in line with the emphasis on student-led inquiry and collaborative learning, the learning commons concept has resulted in a trend toward flexible designs and interactive spaces (Sullivan 2010, 130).

This trend heralded an interest in encouraging students “to invest more of their time in learning” (Bennett 2007, 16). Bennett (2007, 17) saw this challenge to libraries as “shifting from an apparent competition between study and socializing to a regulation of behaviours that are inextricably both academic and social in nature”.

The importance of designing library spaces which are intellectually engaging and stimulating, as well as self-organising is discussed by Freeman (2005, 4); he writes:

...we must not design space that is so generic or anonymous that it lacks the distinctive quality that should be expected for such an important building. The charge to architects is to create libraries that, themselves, learn. One key concept is that the library as a place must be self-organizing – that is, sufficiently flexible to meet changing space needs.

It is in recognition of these library developments that Demas (2005, 26) states that “academic libraries are transforming to become the new Alexandrias on their campus”. Demas (2005, 25) suggests that libraries have come back to the fact that they are about people and learning and that the design of libraries is about seeking “to restore parts of the library’s historic role as an institution of learning, culture, and intellectual community”.

Why definitions are necessary
Bailey and Tierney (2008) advocate the need for information professionals to accept, support and nourish change and innovation in libraries. Rather than perceiving the use of different labels to describe different models of library space as tangential to usage, as suggested by Lippincott (2009), Milewicz (2009) and Harland (2011) labels can serve an important representational function in discussing LIS models and concepts with greater accuracy, authenticity and currency. However, this notion hinges on the extent to which
participants engaging in professional discourse hold shared understandings of the concepts represented by such labels.

Rather than perceiving a lack of definitional consensus to be problematic, Forrest and Halpert (2009) argue that the varied labels used to describe library models are advantageous, allowing for greater flexibility of localised interpretations and customisation. For the authors discussed above the information commons is generally an umbrella term, a short-hand terminology that describes a range of library attributes. While these attributes may not be reflected in all information common models within libraries, their differences are resolved by the fact that they share a common ambition.

The variations of the term “information commons” to which Forrest and Halpert (2009) refer include those previously identified by authors such as Somerville and Harlan (2008), for example, information hub, information village, information arcade, knowledge navigation centre, cybrary, information gallery, electronic information centre, research commons, technology commons, knowledge commons, and academic commons. Some variations of the term “information commons” are arguably more intuitive than others, but it is more important to ask how helpful and meaningful these label variants are to the patrons who frequent these spaces. If these labels are not useful descriptors for constituents and staff, then Milewicz (2009) is correct that the features of a library space are more important than labels in demonstrating an underlying philosophy.

Removing the information commons umbrella

Roberts (2007, 805) suggests that the tendency to conflate learning commons under an information commons umbrella may reflect an understanding of learning commons as being merely a logical extension of the information commons model. Nevertheless, Roberts (2007, 805) argues that this tendency should not obscure the fact that these different models represent distinct paradigms characterised by significant technological, pedagogical and spatial design differences.

The differences between terminology and models are for many a subtle distinction, and taken alone do not represent a break from the information commons ethos; rather they reaffirm the importance of libraries to support learning and knowledge creation. Despite the evident overlap between information and learning commons as descriptions of library spaces, other researchers have explored further differences between these models.

Somerville and Harlan (2008, 3) highlight the historical situatedness of information commons, learning commons and learning spaces. Their particular view is that learning commons is the second iteration of information commons and learning spaces its third. Bonnanda and Donahuea (2010, 231) also trace the evolution of learning commons from the information commons trend: “The concept of learning commons has evolved with more complexity than its predecessor, the information commons”. Accardia, Cordova and Leeder (2010, 312) describe this evolutionary progression as an evolution of the idea of the learning commons, “to its present incarnation as a vibrant, collaborative, technology-infused space”.

Holmgren (2010, 177) also discusses the distinction between information commons and learning commons in evolutionary terms: “Although similar in name to the information commons, the learning commons reflects a marked shift in our conception of the library, a shift that is driven by our evolving understanding of the library’s role in supporting student learning”. Heitsch and Holley (2011, 3) concur, arguing that the learning commons can be seen as an evolution of the information commons marked by the
shift from an instructional learning environment to one focused on self-directed learning and the creation of knowledge.

Towards definitional distinctions
Recognising that some information management professionals distinguish between information commons, learning commons and learning spaces, whilst others do not, is an acknowledgement that the task of providing a generally accepted definition for each of these terms is problematic. As has been suggested, there are fuzzy rather than fixed borders around each library model. Nevertheless, those who persist with the work of teasing out significant differences for definitional purposes offer accounts in the literature that differentiate between information commons, learning commons and learning spaces in academic libraries. It is useful to consider these definitions provided by librarians and information professionals.

Defining learning commons: a social approach
One of the fundamental differences between definitions for information and learning commons and learning spaces is the notion that the learning commons more readily reflects the understanding that students, as learners, are not merely information consumers but actively participate with information in order to create meaningful knowledge and wisdom. This is a critical shift from the purpose of the information commons.

Bennett (2003) highlights this shift by maintaining that while an information commons empowers “knowledge seeking”, a learning commons facilitates the creation of knowledge and sometimes wisdom. Learning and knowledge creation are supported and enhanced as the learning commons seeks to connect people through shared learning tasks such as group assignments where students can take control and ownership over their own learning in the library space. As Bennett (2003, 38) explains: “The core activity of a Learning Commons…would be built around the social dimensions of learning and knowledge and would be managed by students themselves for learning purposes that vary greatly and change frequently”.

Defining learning commons: institutional view
Bailey and Tierney (2008, 3) identify yet another point of difference between the information and learning commons models, arguing that while an information commons provides a “continuum of service” combined with some non-traditional library services, it remains largely if not entirely library-centric. The learning commons on the other hand is more seamlessly integrated with the wider institution, within the library, and thus is “not library-centric”. They also argue that learning commons are more likely to incorporate other student support services which have traditionally operated externally to the library, for example, study and learning centres which provide students with assistance in exam study skills, writing and grammar skills, oratory skills, etc. The integrated character of the learning commons model is representative of a change in the strategic direction of libraries, one that is, “clearly and explicitly aligned strategically with the institution-wide vision and mission” (Bailey and Tierney 2008, 3).

Somerville and Harlan (2008) also discuss the integrative aspect of the learning commons as being more active and involved with the wider institution and more orientated towards supporting the university’s mission in contrast with the information commons.
model. The information commons paradigm typically involved partnerships with IT staff specifically, but the learning commons model extends this partnership programme through cross-disciplinary and cross-campus collaboration with pedagogy experts, subject coordinators, and writing experts, for example, to further facilitate knowledge creation (Somerville and Harlan 2008, 8). Bennett (2008, 183) supports the view of Somerville and Harlan, stating that “the fundamental difference between the information and the learning commons is that the former supports institutional mission while the latter enacts it”.

Defining learning spaces

Somerville and Harlan (2008, 3) view learning spaces in academic libraries as a “third iteration of the Commons concept” by their recognition of spaces that encourage social interactions and knowledge exchange to facilitate and support learning. They state that: “learning spaces … acknowledge the essential social dimension of knowledge and learning”.

The learning spaces model furthers the mission of the learning commons by providing various formal and informal flexible learning spaces that better facilitate learning. This shift in direction is inspired by the understanding that spatial designs influence learning behaviours. As Oblinger (2006, 1.1) states, “Space – whether physical or virtual – can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration, and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness”.

The importance of spatial designs that encourage and support dynamic, engaged and inspired learning behaviours is a fundamental feature of the learning spaces trend. Matthews, Andrews and Adams (2011, 107) discuss how the design of “spaces” inspires particular behaviours before then turning to discuss the pedagogical roots and philosophical influences of learning spaces in academic libraries. The impact of “spaces” becomes more prominent as pedagogical practices in higher education start to move away from the traditional, teacher-centred approach to a more flexible, student-centred approach.

For Somerville and Harlan, the pedagogical underpinnings of learning spaces in academic libraries is an important consideration because it is this idea which fundamentally distinguishes the learning space from information and learning commons. Somerville and Harlan (2008, 17) assert that “learning spaces convey an image of the institution’s philosophy about teaching and learning” and highlight the need for academic libraries to reflect new directions in educational philosophies. Somerville and Harlan (2008, 3) connect changing library design concepts and changing pedagogies which enable “discovery that provides students with ‘knowledge making’ experiences transferable to lifelong learning”.

Keating and Gabb (2005) not only demonstrate the advantages to student learning in providing a range of formal and informal learning spaces, but also describe the variety of collaborative and independent spaces needed to promote self-directed learning. Soderdahl’s (2011) description allows us to visualise what these spaces may involve. From his description we can imagine that a learning space may be an enclosed room with integrated hi-tech equipment and ergonomic furniture designed to accommodate collaborative learning styles. Alternatively, a learning space may be a more informal “diner” inspired partitioned booth with a large HD flat screen monitor and wireless technology, or it may be simply an outdoor space with wireless interconnectivity. Learning spaces may also be represented by a group of people discussing an issue on
couches in an open space, or a group working together around a large table assembled from smaller individual portable tables inside or outside the library building. The development of the learning spaces concept within academic libraries is about providing more varied spaces to accommodate and support the differing needs and preferences of different communities of learners.

Another point of differentiation from the learning and information commons models exhibited by learning spaces is the move towards the academic library becoming the cultural epicentre of the university. As Somerville and Harlan (2008, 18) state:

In leading the transformation from classrooms to learning spaces... innovations for teaching and learning must move beyond the comfortable ‘one-stop service centre’ to become the ‘heart of the university’ teaching and learning environment that brings together students, faculty, technologists, librarians, writing tutors, instructional designers, and other key stakeholders.

This concept supports Freeman’s (2005, 3) idea that: “Within the institution, as a reinvigorated, dynamic learning resource, the library can once again become the centrepiece for establishing the intellectual community and scholarly enterprise”.

The definitions discussed

In many of the descriptive accounts outlined above it is evident that there are overlapping attributes and features of information commons, learning commons and learning spaces. As noted, this is inevitable given that the borders between these concepts are not fixed and can shift subjectively or be permeated. What Somerville and Harlan (2008) identify as being peculiar to learning spaces – formal and informal collaborative spaces that reflect new teaching and learning pedagogies in higher education – other authors, for example, Bennett (2003, 2009) discuss as features of the learning commons. Researchers also talk of “learning spaces” as being a characteristic of the learning commons paradigm. For instance Milewicz (2009, 10) writes: “Recent years have seen another stage in the evolution of information commons spaces with the emergence of the learning commons and its sharper focus on creating learning spaces”. This notion is perhaps even more pronounced within a descriptive account of learning commons provided by Doiron and Asselin, which includes many attributes that others use to specifically describe learning spaces. Doiron and Asselin (2011, 229) describe a learning commons as:

... a dynamic, collaborative learning environment ... [which] combines individual and group study spaces, in-depth reference services, and instruction from ... librarians and information technology staff ... these re-conceptualized learning spaces are understood as ‘community gathering points’ which offer students support in writing, technology use and research, and usually include some sort of social space such as a café and a lounge.

However, Somerville and Harlan (2008, 21–2) also suggest that an increased awareness of the social aspect of learning is more pronounced within the learning spaces model because “a learning space ... accommodates formal as well as informal and technology-based learning”.

Conclusion

This review has examined scholarly literature that discusses the development of information and learning commons and learning spaces in academic libraries. Central to this is an examination of difficulties associated with formulating a fixed and widely acceptable working definition of these iterations in the use of the library space. It has been
argued here that such difficulties reflect the evolving nature of both concept and usage. Despite these definitional challenges, it has also been maintained that there are significant differences that make it possible and productive to differentiate between information commons, learning commons and learning spaces models. Furthermore, to conflate these models under the umbrella term of information commons disregards the historical context of each iteration and the different impetuses that caused these trends to emerge as posited in this paper. By acknowledging distinctive historical factors, purposes, pedagogical influences and attributes we become better positioned to appreciate the significance of emerging trends in academic libraries and their spaces.

References


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