



EDITORIAL

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Launching a Virtual Study Hall Service for University Students During the Pandemic

a crucial third place as a remote alternative

Libraries have long been seen as the elusive “third place” (Elmborg 2011), a space dedicated to social inclusion outside of commercial activities. Campus libraries are often crucial spaces on campus; in addition to housing the knowledge needed for academic pursuits, they provide much-needed seating and shelter for those who seek refuge within the building’s walls. Libraries give students the opportunity for planned social activity and spontaneous interactions that have become integral to the student experience. It was not until libraries were forced to close at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that many students realized a key element to socializing at university was lost. Libraries of all types sought to recreate those interactions online during pandemic closures for their patrons. One such project took place at McGill University, in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. As part of an outreach initiative, a series of virtual study halls were launched in order to provide students with a remote alternative to studying in the hopes of replicating the social nature of the library. This paper explores the conception of the virtual study halls from September 2020 to April 2021.

Literature Review

Libraries fostering engagement through outreach activities benefit students both academically and socially. Esbach (2020, 2) finds that “academically engaged students are motivated, they want to do well in school, and they participate in purposeful activities.” Some libraries have even gone so far as to adopt a “culture of yes” to proposed events as a way to encourage and grow the outreach program and send a positive message to students about collaboration (Owens and Bishop 2018, 77). In fact, “student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes as represented by first-year student grades and by persistence between the first and second year of college” (Kuh et al. 2008, 555).

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Library outreach plays a huge role in how students and staff interact with campus libraries. A 2018 Association of Research Libraries SPEC Kit on Outreach and Engagement revealed how libraries defined and structured their activities: while overall definitions of outreach varied significantly, a majority of respondents included tours, orientation sessions, open houses, and resource tables as being primary outreach activities (LeMire et al. 2018). Bradford Lee Eden’s (2016) *Marketing and Outreach for the Academic Library* explores the

ways in which librarians can engage users on campus. Similarly, *The Library Outreach Cookbook* (Sittler and Rogerson 2020) published by the Association of College and Research Libraries reviews “recipes” for outreach programs and includes a section dedicated to on-campus activity. Often these programs are done in collaboration with non-academic departments outside of the library with writing centers, student affairs offices, and career services being some of the most frequent partners (Wainwright and Davidson 2017, 128).

As library outreach services continue to expand, outreach and engagement are quickly becoming positions in and of themselves and no longer just an offshoot of a librarian’s job responsibilities. The University of Birmingham moved to a functional model in 2017 that resulted in the creation of an Engagement Team (Ashcroft et al. 2020). Buehler (2020) provides a model for understanding unserved or underserved members of a library community as outreach can often play an important role in bridging service gaps. The Indiana University Bloomberg’s library provides an example of outreach to underserved campus communities through the creation of workshops targeted at international graduate students and a branch library with resources for the LGBTQ+ community (Buehler 2020, 60).

There is an abundance of library literature on the use of space and how library space can be defined, especially that of Elmborg’s (2011) discourse on libraries as the third place. For the purposes of this paper, the literature reviewed was limited to articles primarily focused on study spaces and study halls in libraries.

Discussions on academic library outreach would be remiss if they did not consider the aspect of space and how “today’s academic libraries purport to deliver space as service” (Spencer and Watstein 2017, 390). Spencer and Watstein propose that librarians are challenged with “designing increasingly complex spaces” and that this must be done in consideration of “the ever-shifting and evolving landscape of technological possibilities” (399). The Learning or Information Commons is a prime example of how libraries have repackaged space as a service in an attempt to reach as many learning styles as possible (Berman 2020). Many university libraries even provide wellness or de-stress management support either through activities or collaborations. The Louisiana State University Library’s Relaxation Room is an example of how space has been adapted to accommodate wellness and encourage student success (Morgan 2020).

Yet, despite the growing movement toward collaborative study areas, students have frequently been observed studying alone rather than in pairs or groups (Lowe, Miller, and Moffett 2018). Research on the study habits of undergraduate students at the City University of New York revealed that nearly half of respondents preferred private study (Regalado and Smale 2015). This element of solitary study invokes images of the study carrel, a common fixture in many libraries and to some a symbol of academic pursuit. In contrast, students at the University of Tennessee asked for active learning spaces that combined study seating with “a combination of posture and balance seating, standing-height desks, and resistance pedaling workstations” (Walker et al. 2018, 24) creating a blend between the solitary study habits preferred by students and the trends toward wellness support. In a study of commuter students and their space preferences, Bauer (2020) aptly notes that “as technologies and preferences for learning environments change over time, so must evolve the physical space of the academic library” (146).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced physical libraries to close and staff to reconfigure how patrons would access library spaces online. This primarily featured methods of access for collections and specialized software that

previously could only be accessed onsite. Little attention was paid to activities and outreach programs during this time. Some libraries were still able to adapt physical programs or create entirely new virtual activities during this time. The Cushing Memorial Library and Archives at Texas A&M University transitioned to online talks and guest lectures for the public, developed online talks aimed at librarians, and launched virtual exhibits and a blog. (Marini 2022).

Event series were a popular initiative with the University of New Mexico Libraries who launched their Summer of Sci Fi program, which featured three hour-long events, linked social media activities, and themed marketing as a way to discuss science fiction books (Surbaugh 2021). Other academic institutions used the pandemic as an opportunity to collaborate with local public libraries, such as Athabasca University's media literacy workshops with specific emphasis on misinformation on Facebook (Nemeth and Rempel 2020, 3).

A research study in Sweden sought to map digital services in university libraries through the examination of 39 institutions. Of the libraries consulted, the Linneaus University library offered virtual consultations for planning studies, note-taking skills, and oral presentation skills as a new pandemic service (Temiz and Salelkar 2020, 371). Temiz and Salelkar also warn against the "zoom"ification of library employees and their interaction with the audience," advocating for flexible approaches instead (372). Saint Xavier University Library was one of the few institutions who publicized their virtual study rooms; most institutions used Zoom for workshops and consultations (Archer-Helke et al. 2021).

Planning and Preparation

McGill University is a research institution with over 24,000 full-time undergraduate students in Montréal, Québec, Canada. The McGill University Library is made up of several branches, including its largest location, the Humanities and Social Sciences Library (HSSL). During a library-wide census in November 2018, HSSL received 8,195 visits (not including staff) over a period of twenty-four hours, accounting for over half of all library visits made to the entire McGill Library system during the census period. (Badia 2019). The library, which is spread out over two distinct buildings, is arguably one of the most used spaces on campus. At HSSL, Outreach and Engagement consists of a variety of programs and one-shot activities, such as tabling for student club promotion, book displays and exhibitions, pet therapy visits, and more.

In March of 2020, HSSL closed its doors, along with the rest of campus, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the next few months, the staff at HSSL continued to find ways to serve the McGill University community online. Though efforts like remote access to online resources, curbside pickup, and digitization of course material have taken the forefront, outreach activities and programming have remained a priority. From June 25 to July 11, 2020, McGill University conducted a survey of new and returning students regarding planning for a remote fall 2020 semester. The results of this survey revealed that 34 percent of undergraduate students would not be residing in Montréal during the semester and that most students were interested in virtual office hours and virtual group sessions (McGill University 2020). With this information in mind, the Outreach and Engagement Coordinator for HSSL set out to create a virtual study space initiative that would help provide online social spaces for students.

To create the virtual study halls for the fall 2020 semester, it was decided that the web conferencing application Zoom would be used as McGill had purchased an institutional subscription and students would be more familiar with its features. Zoom also provided the capability of creating breakout rooms, which would allow the study halls to expand themes and activities. The original

structure of the study halls offered three styles of breakout rooms to reflect the noise levels permitted on various floors of the physical libraries: silent, quiet, and group. Silent study meant participants could not use audio or video, but they could communicate by chat. Quiet study permitted the use of video and the chat feature only. Lastly, group study allowed for video, audio, and chat. Students were invited to pre-register for a study hall and were initially asked to indicate which of the rooms they would like to join. Over the course of the fall semester, Zoom changed breakout-room access so that participants could select their own rooms, if permitted by the hosts, meaning students no longer needed to be polled prior to entering a study hall; they were welcome to move about the rooms as desired.

The virtual study halls ran for two hours each session and were held twice per week over the course of the term. A member of the library staff, either the Outreach and Engagement Coordinator or a Library Assistant, hosted each virtual study hall. The weekly schedule was designed to offer one early morning session and one late afternoon/early evening session. The hope was that by varying the times throughout the day, the study halls would be accessible to a variety of schedules. The fall 2020 remote planning survey had also revealed that nearly 20 percent of undergraduate students would be in a different time zone during the semester (McGill University 2020). By offering both an early and a late study hall, the library hoped that students would find a day and time that worked for them no matter where they were in the world.

The virtual study halls were expanded during the winter 2021 semester as the library was able to hire two undergraduate students to act as Outreach Assistants with the primary responsibility of designing and moderating their own study halls. From late January until April 2021, HSSL increased its virtual study hall offerings from two sessions per week to three. Additionally, the format of the study halls was altered to accommodate the feedback and experiences from the fall 2020 semester. As a result, three distinct study hall themes emerged: Time Capsule Study Halls, Quiet Study Halls, and the Accountability Café. The Time Capsule Study Hall offered a new experience each week with a setting from a different period in history. The Quiet Study best reflected the original fall 2020 project with emphasis on a silent space to work online. Lastly, the Accountability Café used a coffee shop atmosphere with virtual backgrounds, shared screens, and a playlist for background music. The Accountability Café also differed from other study halls in that students were asked to check in when they joined the session to declare a study goal (e.g., reading a chapter for class, writing a paper, conducting a literature review, etc.). This helped keep all students on task and feel connected.

To promote the virtual study halls, the library's centralized communications office was able to share information to social media and create weekly Facebook events to help with discovery. The communications office also provided information about the virtual study halls to the university's email newsletter. Icons for the study halls were placed on the homepage of the library, both with the top information box highlighting essential resources and services during the pandemic, and in the image gallery box featured next to the catalogue search bar (see figure 1). Liaison librarians were encouraged to share information about the virtual study halls with their own faculties, and prominent student societies were contacted to help promote. The University's Teaching and Learning Services department also contributed to the promotion of the study halls through their own newsletters and by placing links to the registration landing page on their virtual group study kit, which was used to help encourage effective studying during the sessions.

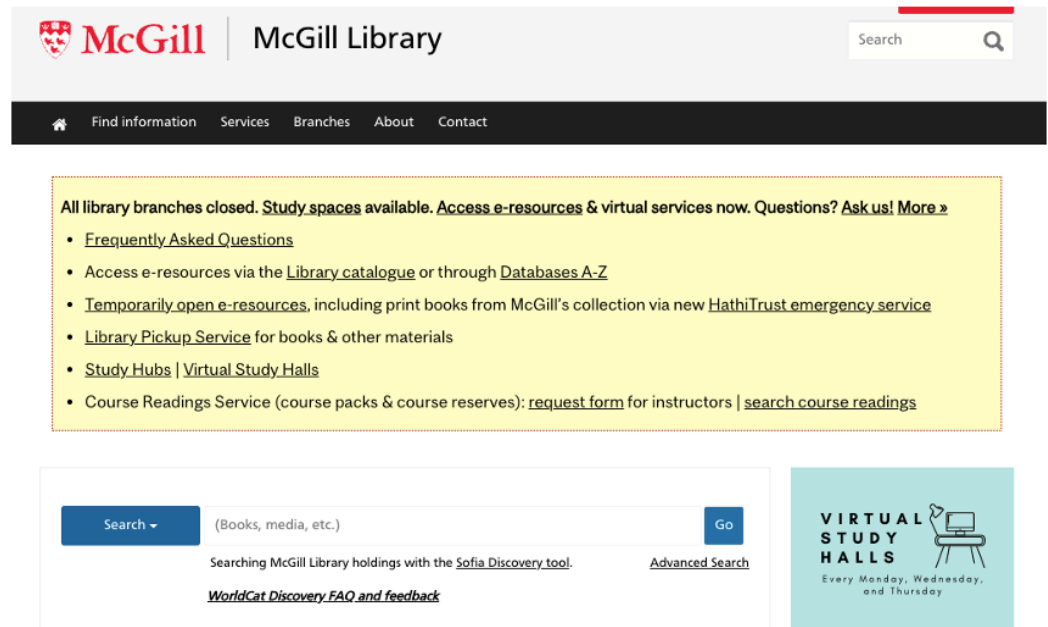


Figure 1. McGill Library home page in January 2021

Assessment

The most important goal for the library staff in creating this experience was trying to help students struggling to connect remotely. It was decided early on by the Outreach and Engagement Coordinator that success would mean even one student found the study halls to be useful. And while widespread promotion helped to encourage registration in the virtual study halls, there were roughly only seventy participants throughout both semesters.

Despite the low attendance, the students who did participate tended to come back each week as the virtual study halls had become a regular part of their work routine. Toward the end of the fall semester, the students became more active in the chat feature, choosing to check in on each other, as well as the library staff hosting the session. While participants chose not to use video and audio, the virtual study halls can still be considered a success as they managed to create a productive work environment for the students who utilized them.

Informal feedback collected from participants of the study halls suggested that the overall experience was positive. Students expressed in the chat that they were grateful to have a place to study and connect with real people. They also liked the aspect of accountability the sessions created by allowing them to put the virtual study hall into their schedule. The library also received communication from students unable to attend the study halls who requested additional times during the week to accommodate more schedules.

Larger community feedback from McGill University shows that students are struggling to stay motivated and balance their education and personal lives. This sentiment is true not just at McGill but at institutions all over the world. Future iterations of the virtual study halls will be incorporated into library activities as needed, and hybrid options will be explored now that the campus has reopened to the public.

Discussion

As with many new virtual initiatives launched in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual study halls were a great way to explore new library programs and make connections with the university community. They offered

a way to bring together students seeking to replicate the social aspect of studying at a library.

A significant takeaway from the virtual study halls is the importance of creating cross-campus collaborations. While the Teaching and Learning Services department played a key role in providing support and promotion for the program, more opportunities could have been made to engage with other groups. Future iterations of the study halls could benefit from partnerships with campus student groups and student faculty associations, many of whom were seeking support and engagement during pandemic closures. For example, the Post-Graduate Students' Society of McGill University had contacted the Outreach Team at the Library about providing workshops and support for various events. They considered running The Accountability Café as a possible activity. More efforts could be made to replicate similar relationships with other student societies.

Another important aspect to improve upon is the structure of the study halls themselves. Even though the structure of the study halls was changed between the fall and winter semesters, more could be done to refine their functionality. Anecdotal feedback suggests that having students set goals and encouraging them to participate in conversation at the beginning of the study hall correlated with higher overall engagement. Offering conversation starters when a student joins a study hall is a favourable way to create relationships and instill a positive experience.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic offered many libraries the opportunity to evaluate their current service offerings and find new ways to connect with users. With the closure of the McGill Library, the virtual study halls promoted a sense of community among students who felt disconnected from their school and their peers. Campus libraries have often been regarded as pivotal locations in academia, not only for the information they hold but also for the physical space. A learning commons or reading room creates a sense of comradery and companionship among students who are endeavoring to pursue their dreams of higher education. While it is impossible to recreate the third space in a Zoom meeting, the virtual study halls served as an intermediary to bring students into these places. Going forward, the pandemic has opened the door for libraries to include more virtual outreach initiatives and provide flexible programming that can meet the needs of users both in person and online. It is unlikely that these digital offerings will disappear in the near future as campuses reopen.

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