Using Service Design Education to Design University Services
Higher Education As a Future Working Environment for Service Designers

Today, there are higher education institutions in various countries that offer service design programmes, but we rarely find that these institutions have taken service development seriously to the extent that they have redesigned their own university services. In many European countries (with the possible exception of the Anglo-Saxon and some northern European nations), the reason for this may be that academic institutions have been conventionally focused on research and some teaching, but not on serving its clients, the students.

In our experience, universities that focus on serving students as clients do so at the expense of their main objective: research. Furthermore, the model of serving student clients is viewed with suspicion by those in academe.

It is, incidentally, even worse in many universities where high proportions of staff are involved in research. This can be also seen in Anglo-Saxon countries: quite frequently students even find that there is no help, and they are made to feel that they are disturbing those working in the research system, by the time and attention that they take up. Students have reported to us that they lose learning opportunities equivalent to a term or more puzzling out study plans, course requirements, or trying to get help in understanding the system. It is not too provocative to call such a system, an ‘anti-service’ system, where non-existing services are swallowing up time and energy. We assert that such anti-service systems are ultimately uneconomic and costly in society.

But, more recently, we have seen the idea of client satisfaction beginning to take hold here in Europe. In 2004 – 2005, Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland was engaged in service design work for the University and has won several awards from the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council. In 2003 – 2004 and in 2006 – 2007, Laurea was appointed as a Centre of Excellence in Regional Impact. The Learning by Developing (LbD) learning model is a pedagogical innovation. It combines the three main tasks of universities of
applied sciences: professional education (learning), applied research and regional development (developing).  

Another interesting example is the service blueprint available online from the University of Derby. Derby has used service design research and methodologies in order to develop their services. But, these institutions are still exceptions, despite some movement in this direction. For instance, faculty-student ratios at universities in Germany have become a recent talking point, since German universities need to catch up with international standards to attract students from overseas. In addition, university management and efficient and adequate use of resources is an ongoing theme, since resources are limited.

Which academic institution is attracting the best and most promising faculty and students? This question gives services a pivotal role in the higher education differentiation strategy.  

Looking at a higher education institution, we can identify two areas of services:  

First, the learning service, since teaching and support of learning is a service. This should not be confused with service learning, which is a strong movement in the US, where students learn and get experience of working in public and private services, in order to prevent higher education institutions from becoming increasingly irrelevant to the real issues facing society. The increasing popularity of volunteerism has contributed to this. As a teaching method, it falls under the philosophy of experiential education.

Second, the services for learning in higher education: these are the support services for students that enable them to learn and use, for instance, library services, enrolment service, housing services, international services, IT support service, where students are able to get help with studying for a term abroad, etc.

It is appropriate, here, to differentiate between learning services and service for learning. At Macromedia Hochschule für Medien und Kommunikation (MHMK), where I currently work and teach, we have developed an MA programme in Media and Design, where students can focus on service design during their studies. The educational setting for this masters course is based on a coaching culture. Students work in teams, focusing on projects (from service, strategy, media and management environments) and faculty teaches professional topics to enhance knowledge in user-centred research, design research and help to develop the skills and methods in design and service design to successfully execute such design projects. In my capacity as both administrator and teaching professional, I was able to stimulate some thinking at the University and, as a result, we believe that we should strive
to overcome the divide between teaching content and organisational behaviour.

Therefore, in one of the projects we carried out with the masters students, we worked on the design of a future-oriented service system for a media library. Supporting the faculty, students have carried out a term-long, extensive research project that has been captured and summarised in the ‘fresh pages library’ concept. The mission of the fresh pages library developed by the students is:

To provide students, professors, and the faculty an open access to academic cross-media content in design, communication, management, technology and the related fields. The compilation of the customised services within one intuitive environment stimulates the use of information, creativity and personal and professional development. By connecting information and knowledge to professional working environments, social spaces and communities enrich the MHMK library campus life and the culture of MHMK throughout all campuses.

Students also developed five principles for the new library through comprehensive customer-focused research. These principles are:

1. Integration, Networking and Internationalism: learn from the best and support the best
2. Customer-Centredness, Service-Oriention
3. Increase Efficiency: one access-point for all Library services
4. Assure Quality
5. Sustainability: Product-Service-System Approach and Product Life-cycle Management, from analogue to a digital work-flow

Central to this concept is the re-imagining of a library as an information hub, the connection of the virtual and the physical space and accessibility to the library whenever and wherever the students need it. Within such a system, librarians are knowledge managers, extremely versatile in understanding contemporary media.

In order to understand the design criteria of the fresh pages library, the project team engaged in research, conducting many interviews with stakeholders, making numerous observations of students’ behaviour, and visiting other libraries. The first major
The first step was the creation of a stakeholder map that showed there were far more stakeholders than the project team would have at first believed. After the creation of this map, systematic interviews were conducted in order to create personas. These personas represented five different user groups of the library. The personas included various students and faculty as well as ‘other users’ (staff and people from outside). During implementation, the project team was often surprised at the complexity of the project. Comprehensive research and benchmarking were carried out, as were swot analyses of the existing situation. Porter’s Five Forces analysis was conducted, and various design research methods were reviewed to find the most appropriate tools.

The workgroup came up with a comprehensive blueprint for the development of a library system that supports learning and researching. New features for the improved library have been developed: peer-to-peer lending, media fetching and delivery, fresh pages live feeds, and a fresh pages credit point system. For example, the fresh pages credit points enable individual students to collect credit points by performing actions on campus, such as research and carrying out work on campus with and for other students.

At first it seemed an unusual idea, but the University has already adjusted the curriculum to accommodate the new feature, collecting credit points by performing actions on campus. With the arrival of the Autumn 2011 cohort, students will also be able to undertake extracurricular activities to receive credit points. Therefore, the developed features will be implemented as well. The workgroup developed a three-phase project plan.

In Autumn 2010, the first phases started and already the University can see an increase in library use. The second and third phase will be implemented over the next few years. But because of the improvements already evident from the increased level of service that the fresh pages library provides, the entire university service system will now be evaluated and redesigned. The process and results will be summarised in a masters thesis on university service systems. This project will be accompanied by smaller service design projects,
focusing on sub-systems, such as the university IT service system.

And finally, looking at the result and the response from other libraries to this first project, we are confident in stating that, within the higher education field, there will be much more work for service designers in the years to come.

References

Book

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