

## **SPEECH: OPENING OF THE LEARNING COMMONS**

**Prof. Arnold van Zyl**

**Date:** 16 February 2011

**Time:** 17:00

**Venue:** JS Gericke Library

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From the beginning of scholarship, libraries and learning have been inseparable. The libraries at Aristotle's School, the Alexandrian Library, at the Grand Umayyad Mosque at Aleppo, the Medicean-Laurentian Library in Florence, the Bodleian Library at Oxford, the JS Gericke Library at Stellenbosch.

In all of these times and places, libraries have been integral to learning. The scholar was the master imparting knowledge to his students. The educational process has transformed drastically over the centuries. The synergy between learning and libraries has become stronger - they have converged to become one. Learning within the contemporary higher education paradigm demands that learning takes place in a collaborative space.

There has been a radical transformation in higher education - from an instructional paradigm, that is, the master instructing the scholar to an experiential learning paradigm – a paradigm that produces capable of continuous learning students. In this contemporary paradigm of learning students, the role of the university is not just to teach and research. The university needs to equip students with the methods to acquire and transfer knowledge. In this paradigm:

- The institution should produce and disseminate knowledge that advances an understanding of natural and social worlds, and enriches the accumulated 'cultural inheritance'
- The institution should cultivate and form the cognitive character of students so that they: 'can think effectively and critically'; They need to have a 'critical appreciation of the ways in which knowledge and understanding of the universe and of society is gained'; have 'a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times; are 'able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it'; have 'some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems';
- The institution should be committed 'to the spirit of truth', and allows intellectual inquiry 'to go where it will' without any 'boundaries'

In each of these characteristics, a significant role should be played by the university library. It is unimaginable that any university can adopt these characteristics without an efficient and effective library that integrates the information and learning space.

In this new higher education landscape, the library must now assume the role of being a highly interactive, proactive, digitally based, cybermix of staff, activities and services. This role is typical of what will be offered in the Learning Commons and in the near future, the Research Commons.

The transformation of pedagogy and the rapidly development of technology have contributed to the redefinition of libraries and librarianship. In this redefined role, libraries contribute significantly to developing learning students.

As collections move into the digital realm, physical collections are being replaced by electronic ones. The growth in the 'electronic collection' and the decline in the hardcopy collection make provision for the decrease in book stack area in favour of an increase in seating with network jacks and power sockets. Librarians often point out that, "in the past we dedicated our spaces to our physical

collections, but these spaces are being increasingly replaced with group work areas and computer workstations.”

This change in pedagogy demands that libraries would have to rethink and redevelop study spaces to create what are generally referred to as the “Information” or “Academic” Commons.

The emphasis is on libraries providing study spaces that enable students to conduct the near synchronous acts of information access, reading, evaluation and writing. Essentially, the role of the physical library, the library as place, is changing. The learner has displaced the collection as the centre of library space planning.

It must be the intention of all leading universities to deliver an educational system underpinned by critical thinking – Stellenbosch University is no exception. In striving to deliver a relevant education based on critical thinking, and ensuring the highest possible student success rate, the University has invested significantly, via the Library and Information Service, in this vibrant and interactive Learning Commons. As we know, knowledge is the only commodity that increases its value, the more it is used.

This facility, as will be explained by Ms Tise, will demonstrate that the investment made will reap benefits in terms of providing a learning that is conducive for collaborative study and private self reflection. Studying at Stellenbosch University must be a pleasure with contemporary facilities that contributes to an enjoyable learning process resulting in even higher student success.