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Back to the Future: The Role of the Campus Bookshop

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► **Abstract:** *Campus booksellers with close links to their university play an essential role in supporting the academic activity of students and the research work of staff, as well as the cultural life of the university. This assertion was overwhelmingly supported by feedback from one hundred members of the academic community at Canterbury Christ Church University during a Periodic Departmental Review of Library Services in November 2014. When there is so much emphasis on providing the ultimate student experience – an academic bookshop on campus is a key asset.*

Keywords: academic; bookseller; bookselling; bookshop; campus; Canterbury Christ Church University; collaboration; learning community; partnership; student; student experience; university; university owned

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Whatever format the academic book of the future predominantly takes – whether virtual or physical – it is about providing options for our students and academics. In the book trade the only thing certain since the demise of the Net Book Agreement in 1995 is that we must expect the unexpected, and roll with the times. But we need to do more than roll with the times – we need to take charge and create opportunities. And we will do this by working together with not just publishers and librarians – but with our lecturers, as colleagues and authors, and with our students and customers.

As curators of content, our academic libraries and bookshops continue to play an undeniably important role in the experience of what it means to be educated and entertained. Bookshops and libraries are not merely noodle factories as acknowledged by Kurt Vonnegut in his wonderful speech of 1976 dedicating the new library at Connecticut College, New London.¹ They are worked by experienced and dedicated crews of librarians and booksellers. And – to paraphrase Neil Gaiman – unlike a Google search, which will return you 100,000 answers, these navigators of knowledge are able to bring you back the right one. In the New World of online marvels, we must not lose sight of the physical artefact, which will continue to play an important role. The book has always been about collaboration, in its production and dissemination, in its journey from author to reader – it is ideas made flesh. In this sense its ebook offspring should be no different.

Books can be purchased and accessed in hard copy and by online retrieval. In the future, academic bookshops will survive as clicks and mortar, adopting online purchasing and smartcard technology; by emphasising the tactile experience of browsing; by expanding product range and services; by offering author signings; workshops and events. So it is not an either/or question of ebook or hard copy; escalators or stairs; or whether these storehouses become impersonal keyboards and clicks, or shelves lined with beautifully produced books. They must provide for both: the existence of bookshops serving their communities – university or high street – is vital to our cultural well-being. That is at the heart of the matter. We must ensure bookshops do not become redundant in the delivery of content – whatever form that content takes.

We estimate that when a bookshop closes, about a third of its sales transfer to another bookshop. This means as much as two thirds of sales disappear. Some of this spend doubtless migrates online; but much of it vanishes from the book sector entirely.²

A Periodic Departmental Review of Library Services took place at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) in November 2014. What follows is a summary of the overwhelmingly positive response from one hundred CCCU academics when asked by email: What are the benefits of an academic bookshop on campus?³

The benefits of a bookshop seem too obvious to announce – to quote an anonymous bookseller: ‘Words cannot do justice to the pleasures of a good bookshop. Ironically.’ In testimonials received from CCCU academic staff an outpouring of support emerged, not only regarding the value of a physical bookshop on campus, but in particular one that is university-owned. A Booker Prize shortlisted author, the Programme Director for our MA in Creative Writing, commented:

In my four years at CCCU, the one thing that has truly impressed me, and that is a match for any institution in the world, is the campus bookshop.

Another respondent said the university bookshop is a ‘centre of text at the heart of campus’ and ‘a symbol of academic rigour and learning.’ It demonstrates in a very physical manner what is involved in the work of a university. The bookshop promotes this not only to current undergraduates, researchers, and conference delegates throughout the year; but to prospective students on open days, to guest speakers and external examiners, and to visiting overseas academics from partner institutions. The bookshop, with its in-store and window displays, is ‘one of the few places [on campus] where there are obvious clues of academic life’, according to another responder.

The bookshop contributes to academic life by the promotion and provision of resources. A core activity, delivered in close partnership with academic staff, is the collation and production of recommended title reading lists which, one responder highlighted, ‘enable students to turn up to classes with books, prepared and ready to participate.’ The curation of recommended books relevant to subject areas studied at CCCU is vital. As is the speedy replenishment of stock on a ‘just-in-time’ basis, and customer orders that are ready for collection the following day, all with an automatic discount. It isn’t just about selling books, it is about meeting customer needs and providing our students with options when it comes to accessing information and acquiring knowledge; whether that is an ebook, a second-hand purchase or borrowing a title from the university library. Booksellers are happy to price-check against online sellers because, contrary to popular belief, it is not always cheaper online.

By working closely with publishers and academic staff, the availability of custom books and 'book bundles' ensure good value. Our bookshop benefits immensely from its inclusion within the Department of Library Services at CCCU. Our staff regularly help students search the library database. Libraries do not put bookshops out of business. Where texts are too expensive, they can be borrowed or accessed; but ebook users continue to use bookshops.

Approachable and knowledgeable booksellers are crucial. It is necessary to pass the 'good bookshop test' – is being able to 'find books when you are not looking for anything in particular' or books the browser 'wouldn't have found on their own'. This 'browsability' was more recently termed by Mark Forsyth as 'the unknown unknown', in a specially commissioned Books Are My Bag promotional title.⁴ The online bookseller equivalent is their 'also bought' selections. The bookshop offers a valuable physical space when it comes to taking time out from the pressures and demands of everyday academic life; it is 'a place for staff and students to wander among ideas and to generate chance sparks of inspiration'. The university bookshop is an 'essential part of the student experience at CCCU' but also 'supports the teaching and research of staff magnificently' as illustrated in the following anecdotes:

Recently, I tried to buy an obscure, almost out of print book on Elizabeth I from a) Amazon and b) the Publisher to no avail (they only had three copies and couldn't find them). The CCCU bookshop was the only outlet that found me a copy, I rest my case.

I know that I can ask for a book that the library do not stock and you can find it and have it 'in House' within days. This makes my work more research focused, more up to date and more effective. It is something I particularly value, even if I am not sure of the title and only know I need a book by Husserl!!

Only this morning I was approached after class by an anxious international student who needed some reading guidance and wanted titles recommended to her. I was able to walk her into the bookshop and put the appropriate volumes straight into her hand. Problem solved.

Other academics have argued that the presence of a university-owned bookshop on campus 'adds to our image as a Place of Learning'. It is an 'essential part of a learning community'; and a 'powerful message of intent and delivery, of what, as a university, we are all about'. It has been described as 'CCCU at its best', and its booksellers as 'book ambassadors

who go into the world holding a CCCU banner? Like many high-street bookshops, the university bookshop is a modern, welcoming retail environment with seating and an adjacent Touchdown Café; but as a university-owned bookshop:

It underscores the open-ended quest for understanding and enlightenment that must surely be at the heart of a Church-founded institution of Higher Education... without it we're in danger of reducing education to the level of a purely financial transaction.

It belongs to us – we can have a say in what is provided, stocked and offered to staff and students in a timely way. It is run by colleagues who understand our programmes, our requirements, and who are open to new ways of working. They are student and staff centric, they go the extra mile.

The university bookshop helps students identify with the university; and like the library, chapel, sports centre, art gallery, and student union it is an essential part of the student experience. The bookshop's Twitter account (@cccubookshop) has received many positive direct messages and tweets from followers external to CCCU lamenting the absence of a bookshop at their university.

During open days introductory texts are recommended to those interested in courses at CCCU, and such engagement might make all the difference in terms of converting prospective students to new students. Including the open days, bookselling at CCCU has evolved 'to meet the disparate needs of different campuses and respond to the diverse mix of programmes'.

Ownership allows for a closer working partnership with CCCU academic staff across all faculties and schools; as well as with colleagues in the library, and many other professional service departments. The bookshop stock is organised to reflect the faculty/school structure at CCCU. One section is dedicated to publications authored by CCCU academic staff; as well as CCCU students. This demonstrates to our students (and the general public) how tutors are actively engaged in research, exemplifying scholarship in their field of expertise. Publications by students are also promoted and displayed:

The shop promotes local and/or lesser known visiting writers and smaller presses in a way that the large chains will simply not do.

The bookshop distributes CCCU publications such as John Lea's 77 *Things to Think About: Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (2012). Currently discussions are under way to investigate the potential of

creating a CCCU Press, making postgraduate work readily available online and in a printed format.

The bookshop supports the university's public lecture series, as well as conferences and author signings. The latter is sponsored by the School of Humanities, and the Faculty of Education at CCCU. Authors recently included Esther Freud and Louis de Bernières with forthcoming readings from John Boyne, Michael Morpurgo, and Shami Chakrabarti planned for 2015–16. In total 34 events were organised by the bookshop in the last academic year. These are a form of outreach opening the university to the local community and supporting the university's widening participation agenda. As one respondent stated, the university is 'actively recruiting many students who have grown up in homes with no books' and 'some of whom live in areas with no bookshops, or small bookshops with only a very limited range of bestselling titles'. Conferences and book signings, with Michael Rosen or Anthony Browne, have resulted in more books in school classrooms and in the hands of teachers and pupils. Attending university is an exciting but potentially daunting prospect and according to one academic 'the presence of an in-house bookshop and a friendly face... could mean the difference between a student being a proud graduate or not'.

If our mission is to develop knowledge and pedagogic practice for our students and the community at large, the bookshop is in the forefront of supporting this essential role.

Notes

- 1 K. Vonnegut (1994) *Welcome to the Monkey House, Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (London: Vintage Books), pp. 469–77.
- 2 D. McCabe (2013) 'Why Bookshops Matter', *The Bookseller*, <http://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/why-bookshops-matter>, accessed 4 September 2015.
- 3 Responses from CCCU staff have been anonymised.
- 4 M. Forsyth (2014) *Bookshops and the Delight of Not Getting What You Wanted* (London: Icon Books).



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