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Science Library, University of Colombo – the beginning...

“The library is the heart of the university” - that was the first thing that came to my mind when I heard the wonderful news that the Science Library has finally found a place to call its own in a brand-new building designed specifically for the purpose of functioning as the information and learning hub of the Faculty of Science. When I joined the University of Colombo as an undergraduate in 1977 there was no 'Science Library'. Instead, there were several Departmental Libraries to cater to our library and information needs. As far as library services were concerned, all that we knew at the time was that we could borrow books from these collections.

The departmental collections were housed in rooms within the Departments of Botany, Chemistry, Physics and Zoology. They were basically rooms filled with books manned by a Library Assistant/clerk whose main duty was to take care of the library lending service. The Zoology collection was placed in a small room in the old Zoology Building between the lecture hall and the laboratory. The walls were lined with cupboards and shelves filled with books and there was hardly any space to move around, let alone reading space. I remember rushing to the library after lectures and laboratory sessions to find books to help complete lab work, and to supplement what we learnt during lectures. I do not recall spending any time in this library other than the time spent on browsing the collection to find what we want. The two rooms at the entrance to the Botany Department housed the botany collection. There was a neat row of cupboards lining the walls with small reading areas in the middle equipped with tables and chairs. The windows on either side or the door facing the green lawn allowed fresh air and natural light into the room creating a pleasant environment for study and reflection. The Chemistry library was situated in a large L shaped room near the Chemistry laboratory. While shelves filled with books lined the walls, there were rows of tables and chairs providing sufficient space for reading and study. I've heard that there was a Physics library in the old Physics building - a room with books and a small reading area just like in the other departments. I had no idea about the mathematics collection, but I found out quite accidentally - sometime later, that there were mathematics books in the Main Library.

During freshman orientations, we were told that we will be given library cards and that we could borrow books from the Departmental libraries. We learned through experience that you had to pay a fine in addition to the risk of facing the grumpy library assistant when you failed to return books on time. Library hours were from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. during weekdays and the libraries

were closed during weekends. At that time there were no means of communication between the library and the users, unlike nowadays where you can go online and find out about library hours, about services and resources that are available etc.. We did not know until much later that the Main Library was kept open after office hours until 8:00 p.m. on weekdays and on weekends during examination time. Since there was hardly any place in the Science Faculty departmental libraries to sit and study, we got used to spending a lot of time in the Main Library during the latter part of our undergraduate years. When I got bored while studying, I would walk around browsing the Main Library collection and there I discovered books dealing with a wide range of subjects in addition to the science and mathematics collection. I used to love the spacious reading room on the upper floor with glass windows all around that allowed tired eyes to rest and enjoy the tranquility of the surrounding environment.

My perception of the University Library changed drastically when the Zoology collection was moved to the ground floor of the New Biology Building sometime during 1979. The new library was located at the entrance to the Zoology Department providing easy access to all users. It was a larger room with plenty of windows on either side allowing bright sunlight and air circulation. The layout of the room enabled easy access to books while making room for small reading areas near the windows. In addition to book filled cupboards and shelves there were open shelves displaying current journals, while back issues of periodicals were stored within reach of users. This was quite an improvement from the previous place which was nothing more than a room full of books. On top of all these changes, the most welcome change was the appearance of a friendly young Library assistant who was placed in charge of the library.

Looking back at my final undergraduate years, I now realize the central role played by the new Zoology departmental library. One would think that it was only natural that I would gravitate towards the Zoology library because I majored in the Zoological Sciences. However, the central location and inviting atmosphere of the library were major factors that drew us towards the library. The library automatically became our meeting place and the information hub of the department, facilitating greater communication and collaboration between the library, students and academics. The library became the one stop shop for all our information needs. The library assistant was always ready to help us find what we were looking for. Not only did we find books to supplement what we learned in class, we were also able to keep abreast of the latest developments in our areas of research through latest periodicals. We spent many hours going through the extensive collection of older journals, to learn from what others have done, and find inspiration for creating new knowledge through research.

I joined the Library, University of Colombo as Assistant Librarian Science in 1982. My office was located in the Main Library building and my duties were mainly related to collection development. This involved ordering books and periodicals based on recommendations from faculty. Almost all our orders had to be placed through foreign suppliers because highly specialized scientific literature required for academic purposes was not available at local bookstores. Books and other publications pertaining to fauna and flora of Sri Lanka were obtained via local publishers and booksellers. From time to time, we received donations of books from the British Council and the Asia Foundation. I remember receiving a large consignment of books on Computer Science around

the time when Computer Science was introduced to the curriculum. Once the books arrived, I had to catalogue and classify them and make sure they were processed and sent to the relevant departmental libraries. Other than that, I had little or no contact with the departmental libraries. I was fresh out of college and had little to no knowledge about ordering books and periodicals etc. I was lucky to have Mrs. S.C. Jayasuriya, the former Librarian as my mentor. She was in charge of acquisitions and she was always there to support and guide me. I enjoyed carrying forward the innovative work implemented by my predecessor late Mrs. Malini Wijesinghe. This included providing a personalized information service called the Current Awareness Service to interested faculty. This enabled us to provide access to the latest research articles published in the Biological Sciences at a time when we did not have access to Indexing & Abstracting journals, or databases. Not only did we alert faculty of the latest developments in their fields of research, but we also helped them to obtain journal articles that were not available in our library via an Interlibrary Loan Service, from other libraries in the country. Articles that were not available anywhere in the country were obtained via the British Library Documentation Service using coupons donated to us by the British Council ODA program. Emeritus Professor W.D. Ratnasooriya who was recently ranked among the top 2% of scientists around the world in a recent paper from Stanford University was our number one patron when it came to the Current Awareness Service.



In 1984, I was entrusted with the task of bringing all the departmental collections together to form the Science Library. The new library was to be housed on the 4th and 5th floors of the New Chemistry Building. This was literally an uphill task because it involved hand carrying bundles of books and heavy furniture up an endless flight of stairs due to the absence of an elevator. The biological Sciences collection and library offices were located on the 4th floor while the Physical Sciences collection was housed on the 5th floor. The collections from different locations merged and gradually evolved into a freestanding Library thanks to the enthusiasm, dedication and hard work of library staff. I was fortunate to have the support of a team of staff who took it upon themselves to work tirelessly towards our common goal of providing the best service to students and academics of the Science Faculty.

With the establishment of the Science Library, we were able to expand the services provided to our users. New services were added to cater to the needs of students and faculty. Large reading areas were set up on the 4th and 5th floors of the library. Function of the reading areas differed in relation to the different learning styles of the users. The Biological sciences area was used mainly as a quiet study area while the tables were rearranged by the students to facilitate group study in line with the problem-solving nature of the Physical Sciences. Library hours were extended following the practice already in place in the Main Library. A new service that had a very high demand was the Photocopying Service. Another new feature - the addition of past examination papers collections proved to be very valuable to students when they were studying for exams. The Interlibrary loan Service which was earlier limited to academics was made available to all users.

The Current Awareness Service was extended to cover the Physical Sciences as well. We started a library newsletter to keep our users informed about new developments in the library.

As we gradually became familiar with the collections, we began to observe strengths and weaknesses in each subject area. Steps were taken to identify areas that needed additional resources including titles that were in great demand which required the addition of multiple copies. Input from many sources such as recommendation of faculty, lending statistics, usage patterns etc. were considered when determining collection needs. Library staff who had direct contact with users provided valuable information. We managed to improve the collection based on user needs and took steps to make sure that students had ready access to course related books that were in high demand by reserving additional copies under a Permanent Reference collection. What was really noteworthy was the input by the support staff. Although they had never studied Biology or Chemistry, they knew exactly what the students were looking for when they rushed into the library looking for books. They brought years of experience and knowledge about the collection and student needs. I hope the new generation of library staff will follow their lead.

The difficulty in getting to the library was a major drawback as everybody was exhausted by the time they reached the library. While reminiscing about old times, a former student and faculty member who is now a Professor in the US, mentioned how they used to run up the stairs to avoid the drudgery of climbing one step at a time without paying attention to which floor they were passing until they reached the board with the sign indicating the Science Library on the 4th floor. From there they had to climb one more flight of stairs to get to the Physical Sciences section. Once, on the day before the exams, two of his friends - who are now faculty members (one is in Sri Lanka and the other is in the US), had pranked him by moving the signboard to the 5th floor leading him to climb up to the water tank on the top instead of the library. There had been more to the story, but he stopped at that! Trying to elaborate on how much time they spent in the library during exam time, he shared with me their schedule which went like this: "8.00 a.m. - come to campus, 8.00-9.00 a.m. - chat under Jam tree, 9.00 a.m. - make the long climb to the math library on fifth floor, 9.00-11.30 a.m. - study in the library, 11.30 a.m.- 12.30 p.m. - lunch, 1.30-2.30 p.m. - chat under the jam tree, 2.30 p.m. - do the long climb again. 4.30 p.m. - come down again, have plain tea from the open canteen, chat and make the long climb again, and study until 8.00 p.m. when the library closes. Then hit "Raheema" (a nearby restaurant). He mentioned several books that he used frequently such as the Schaum Series, Physics, by David Halliday, Robert Resnick and Kenneth S. Krane, the famous Solid Geometry book by L. Line and Barton's number theory book to name a few, recalling how much he appreciated the library collection. Being an avid reader, he remembers coming across an expensive rare book by Arthur C. Clarke while browsing the collection out of curiosity and mentioned how happy he was that the library had it. He was also happy to find other rare books such as The Birds of Ceylon (at the Main Library). I have no doubt that the largest collection of books on science in the country is found in the Science Library, University of Colombo.

Having done all I could to complete the task of establishing the Science Library, I felt it was time to move on and allow someone new with fresh ideas to take over. I requested a transfer back to the main library to face new challenges. Dr. Chandrani Kuruppu took charge of the Science Library

in 1991, and in 1993 the building had to be returned to the Chemistry Department. A new location for the library was found in the old Physics Building. This move could be considered a downgrade as it took us from a spacious and airy new building to an old building which was gloomy and cramped with hardly any light or air circulation, certainly not an ideal place for a library. One positive aspect was the convenient and central location of the new library. It was situated on the ground floor near the center of the faculty providing easy access to students and faculty from all departments. The library remained in the old Physics Building until it was moved to the New Learning Resource Center building as part of the centenary celebrations on the 21st of January 2021.

It took the last one hundred years for the Science Library to grow and evolve from small departmental collections scattered throughout the campus to a freestanding modern library. It was the realization of an impossible dream. I hope that during the next one hundred years the library will become the academic heart of the Faculty of Science, supporting new ways of teaching and learning in collaboration with students, researchers and academics.

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