

Common Ground: Libraries and Learning

Barbara Fister

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Where can a student hang out with friends, work on a group project, grab a snack, check e-mail, get help with a writing assignment, learn how to import census data into a GIS program, play a game of Go with a student in New Zealand – and, for a change of pace, have a stimulating conversation with Plato, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva?

Where else but at the library?

On many campuses, libraries have integrated some of the functions of the student center, public computer lab, academic support services, and coffee shop into traditional library functions. Though this shift in the identity of the library often develops as a response to changes in student behavior rather than as planned change, there is a good reason for this development.

Libraries are fundamentally social institutions.

Even a hundred years ago, when libraries were supposed to be quiet places for contemplative study, they served as cultural icons that represented their communities' ethos. They provided a communal pool of resources and public reading rooms where people from diverse backgrounds could sit together at long tables in a space that bespoke the commonality of their enterprise. The nineteenth-century development of the public library (like the public school) was in one sense democratic – bringing people of all backgrounds together – but also an instrument of unifying an increasingly diverse nation of immigrants.

The decorative motifs of the beaux arts library had a didactic purpose. Just as cathedrals were "Bibles in stone," relating scripture in sculpture, the facades of great libraries, carved with names of great thinkers and portraying the symbolic virtues of education, were a kind of "education in stone," expressing the library's purpose – to improve its citizenry by involving them in an American version of the Western tradition.

The social nature of the academic library today is somewhat different – and certainly noisier. The enduring value of the library as a cultural meeting place is taking on a more extroverted character as libraries realize how potent that social element can be in fostering learning.

Paradoxes of the "New" Library

A few years ago, as the Internet and the rise of electronic databases altered the way knowledge is produced and disseminated, some predictions were made.

- Once people can access information conveniently in their dorms and offices, they will have little need to come to the library.

- When students need help, they will prefer to ask questions electronically rather than go to a reference desk.
- Students won't mind reading material on computer screens rather than on pages.
- Students will readily adopt e-books because they prefer computers to traditional books.
- The need for building and renovating libraries will diminish as more materials are made available online.
- Libraries will become less essential to the learning process than computer centers.
- Libraries in general will become less important to all kinds of communities and their use will diminish over time.

Students have confounded these expectations. In fact, several large-scale studies have found these surprising, and seemingly paradoxical, results.

- Though more than 85 percent of college students own computers, many still prefer to use work and study spaces on campus other than their dorm rooms; even students with laptops find carrying them at all times a hindrance and often use public computing facilities instead.
- Students prefer face-to-face encounters at the reference desk and in the classroom even when electronic options are available. Ironically, students sometimes use reference chat services when they are in the library, not because they prefer it to face-to-face contact but merely to avoid losing their seat in a high-demand library computer lab.
- Students, like most people, vastly prefer to read text on paper rather than on screen. When working on a project, they often mark up and sort printed material into logical piles, something they find more difficult to do with digital files than with printouts.
- Students have not been enthusiastic adopters of e-books because copyright law and publisher concerns about piracy protect the material from being printed out except in small amounts – and because students find traditional books easier to navigate and read.
- The number of academic libraries being built and renovated in the past fifteen years has not decreased.
- Computing facilities in libraries are frequently preferred by students over computer labs in other buildings.
- Academic libraries of all types, after several years of declining book circulation, are seeing an upturn; the number of visits to public libraries has more than doubled in the past ten years.

The early predictions neglected a couple of important features of the way students use information in their learning process. Computer screens don't offer the advantages of paper when it comes to working with texts, whether in the form of books or full-text electronic articles. And computer networks, while they enable many types of social exchanges, have not taken the place of face-to-face social interaction. The belief that computers and print, or electronic networks and libraries, are somehow in competition with each other has been proven false. The point-and-click generation, those consummate multi-taskers, have found ways to incorporate the best of both worlds into the new hybrid library.

Social Dimensions of Knowledge

The old-fashioned image of the hushed stacks, where solitary readers commune in silence with books (a place inevitably described as "dusty" in popular accounts), was for some years replaced by the vision of a digital information delivery system, one that treats texts as so much just-in-time inventory, granular bits of knowledge efficiently delivered to or called up by isolated users. In reality, faculty often do prefer desktop delivery to a trip to the library. For students, however, the traditional library and the virtual version are complementary, dynamic spaces that blend the physical and the virtual in ways that reflect the social nature of knowledge.

Reading. Many claims were made when computers offered new ways to present and manipulate text. Some aficionados of hypertext asserted they were an improvement on print because hypertexts were "interactive." In fact, texts have always been interactive. Literacy grows out of social interactions and is often practiced in groups. The act of reading is itself a social interaction between text and reader. The reader engages with the text, reinscribing it with meaning that is a combination of the text and what the reader brings to the exchange — personal experience, previously read texts, and the reader's immediate needs that drive the direction of the reading.

Creation. More profoundly, sociologists of knowledge argue the creation of new knowledge is a socially negotiated process. Communities share ideas, work out differences, take sides, split into camps, agree to discard concepts that no longer work, and try out new ones to see how they fit. Even in the most empirically-driven fields, knowledge isn't simply a sedimentary accrual of discoveries, it is a process of defining and redefining what, at any one time, constitutes our common knowledge base.

Collaboration. In the classroom, collaborative learning practices involve students in participating in scholarly discourse communities. Every trip to the stacks is entry into a conversation, as eavesdropper or as a participant (should the student engage in actually reading texts, as opposed to simply copying passages from them). And as more students work in groups, the process they use to gather, sift, and talk about what they find mirrors the process scholars use to make new knowledge. The top-down authority of lecture and textbook are replaced by discussion and discovery. Certainly, the

growth in active learning activities and the increase in group assignments point to ways this social dimension of learning is finding its way into college teaching.

It makes practical sense for the library — open when the classroom isn't, a common ground among many disciplines, and primarily occupied by students working without their teachers' direct guidance — to be a prime site for this sort of learning.

The Needs of Undergraduate Researchers

Novice researchers cannot approach inquiry the way experts do. For the undergraduate, thrown into the multiple discourses that constitutes a general education — chemistry at nine in the morning, sociology at eleven — the library provides a uniquely comfortable place to explore and browse and experience the connections among disciplines.

Choosing a topic. Writing handbooks typically describe research as a process initiated with this simple command: choose a topic. This step is presented as something that happens before going to the library, something nearly impossible to do without first exploring the possibilities and getting familiar with the landscape of a subject area. Experts have already done this, often through years of immersion in the field, before they choose a research question.

For undergraduates, choosing a topic in an unfamiliar field is best done in the library where virtual and print collections converge. Browsing, a seemingly aimless, directionless activity, is an essential part of the research process for undergraduates, who don't know what questions are worth asking or what keywords to use when querying a database. They must scan, compare, and size up the parameters of the area in question before settling on a topic, and more focused scanning is required before that topic can be turned into a research question. Studies of undergraduate research processes suggest that the topic formulation stage occupies a substantial piece of the timetable of any of research project. A library designed to encourage exploration can help with that crucial stage in research.

Synergy of research and daily life. While students are working on projects, they will also be checking E-mail, sending instant messages, and chatting with friends. Research, at its best, isn't practiced in a single, linear path nor is it practiced in isolation from the rest of life. It's messy, recursive, creative, and (quite often) fueled by good, fresh coffee. Because computers have gone beyond being information processing tools and have become essential for communication, composing texts, creating multimedia projects, numerical analysis, news-gathering, shopping, and game-playing, a student can do all of these from one desktop — the same one they use to look up books and search databases.

In the early days of the Internet, many librarians thought it was somehow a misuse of resources to let students read and send e-mail on library

computers, let alone play games; such activities were often explicitly banned. As libraries began to provide more public-use computers, there was some debate whether students should be allowed to write papers on the same computers used to search the catalog and library databases. Now the ubiquitousness of computers in all aspects of our lives has blurred these functions to the point distinctions and prohibitions are pointless. Moreover, as more computers loaded with standard software suites appeared in the library, students discovered something interesting: writing papers and preparing speeches worked best where research materials and reference assistance were readily available. In time, libraries began to see the wisdom of the now rather obvious synergies among communication, information seeking, reading, and composing.

"Information" or "learning" commons. The development of "information commons" has drawn students into libraries and given libraries the image of being on the forefront of technological change. But is this change purely technological? If so, why is it that computers in libraries are so much more attractive to students than public computer labs elsewhere on campus? While library computers are no doubt popular, it is their presence in a space that is resource-rich and socially compelling that drives their high use.

Yale University Librarian Emeritus Scott Bennett prefers the term "learning" commons, "spaces where learning is the primary activity and where the focus is on facilitating the social exchanges through which information is transformed into knowledge." These spaces include both technology and traditional architectural motifs that speak volumes about its purpose. In the course of Bennett's research, one director said about his library, "It's the most democratic building on campus, and if it's grand and awe inspiring and at the same time warm, comfortable, and inviting, it makes a tremendous statement about how the college feels about learning and teaching."

In Bennett's view, learning commons – like the common rooms of the past – are places of interdisciplinary discourse and discovery. Technology is not positioned as the center of learning, but rather the focus is on interaction among students and teachers, among students and texts, across various disciplines. Learning commons are creative and flexible and encourage a certain kind of playfulness – inviting interplay between ideas, among disciplines, and within groups.

The metaphysical meeting place. Philosopher Michael Oakshott sees this exploration as non-hierarchical and open-ended. Knowledge is something that doesn't arise only out of formal argument but through interchanges among people who bring a variety of perspectives together in an interdisciplinary meeting place, a place that "is not an inquiry or an argument, but a conversation." This conversation is driven by "a tension between seriousness and playfulness. Each voice represents a serious engagement . . . but in its participation in the conversation each voice learns to be playful, learns to understand itself conversationally and to recognize itself as a voice among voices." Inviting students into that ongoing conversation is what higher education is all about. The library can provide a physical setting for that

metaphysical meeting place.

Libraries Designed for Collaboration

Changes in library design since the early nineties have been driven by the need to accommodate changes in student learning styles and pedagogy, requiring more space for groups to work together, smart classrooms to support the growth in library-based instruction programs, and space for non-library operations that support student learning. Teaching and learning centers, multimedia production, writing tutors, and IT assistance can all find homes in a space that speaks with traditional library architectural language, yet offers comfort and flexibility.

Organizational structure. This does not mean that these units need to be administratively merged to work together. No organization defined by lines on a chart is capable of adapting to change as fluidly, as creatively, and as nimbly as needed in these fast-changing times. In fact there is compelling evidence that a free-form collaboration across units can achieve what many "shotgun marriages" of technology departments have not. This year's Excellence in Academic Libraries award presented by the Association of College and Research Libraries went to the University of Washington Libraries, in part for their innovative collaborative practices focused on inviting campus units to work together to improve student learning. One showcase for this work is the UWired project, begun in 1994, that pulls together IT, library services, teaching technology, and academic departments into collaboration within the library. The departments involved are connected not by reporting lines, but rather through the intersections of their missions. UWired is people-centered, flexible, interdisciplinary, and experimental. Learning is at its heart and conversation is its method.

Collaborative teaching. If libraries are truly about learning, rather than about technology, the most important collaboration must be between the library and teaching faculty. The best way for libraries to help prepare students for life-long learning is to familiarize faculty across campus with the resources the library offers, sensitize them to the problems students encounter when trying to learn the ropes, and make them aware that librarians are willing and able to help.

This help takes various forms. Workshops conducted in the library by librarians give students a hands-on opportunity to get familiar with resources, search strategies, and evaluation of sources. In addition to providing introductory experiences, many libraries have established subject-based liaison relationships with departments. Librarians, working with the faculty in their designated departments, develop hands-on workshops and highly-focused resource guides for courses from freshman through senior levels, recognizing that advanced students need a different kind of help than freshmen and that they will be most motivated to learn when they're engaged in disciplinary research. And all libraries offer reference service that provides students with an on-the-fly, personalized research tutorial, addressing individual students' needs at the moment they need help.

The library is a uniquely fertile place for collaborative learning. It is by its nature a shared resource, not anyone's turf or territory. It spans both high-tech and traditional approaches to information. It spills out from within its walls across campus and to remote servers. It deliberately includes divergent opinions and contradictory information, recognizing that knowledge is always under construction, that judgments have to be made. Librarians, too, are in a unique position, fluent in the lingua franca necessary for negotiating different disciplinary discourses and levels of sophistication.

Working with faculty in the disciplines, librarians can help students take their place in the common ground of human knowledge, find their own voice among voices, and join the conversation. — Barbara Fister is an academic Librarian at Gustavus Adolphus College. < fister@gac.edu >

Further Readings

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