

Libraries and the Cartography of Knowledge

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Abstract: When we claim libraries contribute to lifelong learning, what exactly do we mean? Libraries play different roles in society: they are repositories of cultural expression, places where children and adults nurture their imaginations, laboratories for learning and the creation of new knowledge, and testbeds for new information formats. How do all of these roles intersect and contribute to lifelong learning? How are libraries redefining themselves as physical places, social institutions, and as virtual entities? Borrowing concepts from cultural geography, we'll explore the future of libraries and their role in mapping knowledge.

The question I want to ponder this morning is this: what do libraries have to do with learning? And what sort of learning goes on in libraries? Big questions, ones we'll have several days to explore. But I want to think about these questions from a particular angle: the perspective of spatial experience. How do we experience the library as a place, and what does that contribute to our understanding of the wider world? To turn it around, what can librarians learn from their users' experiences, and how can we use that insight to make our libraries better learning spaces?

People at different ages have various relationships to libraries. Public libraries play a major role in childhood literacy by providing books and programs for children and teens. In K-12 schools and colleges, the library is a laboratory for extending learning beyond the classroom, providing an opportunity for students to learn how to enter into the ongoing conversation about ideas that is at the heart of making knowledge. After college – well, there things get a bit fuzzy. Though information literacy programs in higher education claim to prepare their students for lifelong learning, we tend to focus on helping students learn how to use their college libraries to be better students. What we don't know is whether those research skills are used after college, though it is promising to learn from a recent OCLC study that college students use libraries heavily and that 40% of them visit a public library at least once a month. Still, we haven't done a particularly good job of consciously bridging the college students' experience of libraries to their adult lives. But one thing we can say with confidence is that libraries provide millions of Americans of all ages with reading material of all types, access to information through both the physical library and its virtual incarnation, and a social, civic space that nurtures engagement and curiosity.

A decade ago there was much talk about the virtual library. The capacity for libraries to provide digitized information anywhere, anytime seemed to hold enormous promise – and a certain amount of underlying anxiety, because libraries weren't the only ones staking a claim to this brave new world. Not only would the library spill beyond its walls to reach users wherever they happened to be – the metaphorical "place" of libraries in society was challenged as others claimed to provide similar routes to ubiquitous information, sometimes confusing the pipeline with the knowledge it supposedly contained. In 1995, for example, there was a television advertisement for MCI in which a precocious Anna Paquin intoned "It will connect all points. Its speed will be the speed of light. It will not go from here to there. There will be no there. We will all only be here." This notion of a ubiquitous, global network unifying everyone and everything – and incidentally accessed through a single telecommunications provider – is a far cry from the local public library. It is neither local nor public, but it claims to be able to provide all information to everyone, effortlessly, transforming society in the process.

Now, of course, "the library as place" has overtaken interest in the virtual library in library literature and at conferences like this. Again, the impetus for this conversation is driven both by the positive potential of enhancing the physical library, but also by some anxiety that if we don't make those places attractive and inviting our patrons will go elsewhere. Though we aren't

threatened by MCI anymore, Barnes and Nobles made off with our traditional furnishings to make their bookstores more like libraries than most libraries are and, worse yet, Google seems to have appropriated the library's mission – "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." Libraries, in fact, aren't competing with bookstores or Internet search engines – Internet users are also library users, and bookstore junkies usually carry library cards to sustain their addiction – but we have been forced to reevaluate our place in society.

Which is nothing new. Libraries have always been a place where cultural meaning is contested, and we can chart that contest in their architecture because buildings use design elements to communicate "communal values and beliefs" (Roth 5). Early public library designs in the United States tended to be monumental symbols of civic pride, harkening to European roots while sending the message that there was a particularly American culture just as good as the old world's. The Boston Public Library sends a mixed message – it says over its door that it is a democratic institution – by the people and for the people – yet the Ecole des Beaux-Arts design intentionally dwarfs the individual and carries the perhaps unintended message that culture is for the elite, or at least those who aspire to join the elite. According to architectural historian Abigail Van Slyck, "The large urban library buildings erected in this era reflected the tension that trustees felt between the urge to protect culture from the contamination of the working class and the desire to use culture to redeem the 'general public'" (67). Interestingly, this language remains potent: the Chicago Public Library, build in 1991, carries some of the same messages – because when the board charged with choosing the winning design looked at their options, they found this was the only one that, to them, "looked like a library." This impressive book gallery at public library of Woburn, Massachusetts, is reminiscent of monastic libraries of the past, and like those libraries the books were off-limits to the public. These stacks were visible, but inaccessible to all but the staff, and were criticized by librarians of the day for being hard to heat and inefficient for book retrieval. There were also separate reading rooms for men and women, and no provision for children who, as in most public libraries of the time, were banned from the premises.

The progressives among librarians believed that libraries could promote the acculturation of new immigrants and lessen social tensions while "fostering a common culture based on middle-class values" (Van Slyck 76). In the 1890s stacks were opened and children's rooms were added, but the didactic element remained. John Cotton Dana argued libraries should abandon "the palace, the temple, the cathedral, the memorial hall, the mortuary pile" as the appropriate image for libraries and instead look toward "the workshop, the factory, the office building" for what he called "the book laboratory" (Van Slyck 205). Efficiency was preferred over grandeur and in the process, according to Van Slyck, "the library lost its potential to serve as a site – literally and figuratively – for public discussion and debate" (219).

This dichotomy of values raises exactly the question libraries are asking today. We've found the palace to be an inhospitable place for learning, especially when the external grandeur of a library is a shell for a dingy, maze-like collection of stacks not designed for public access. And Dana's efficiency is not the ultimate goal; we are so efficient you don't even need to be in the library to use it, but we've realized that mere efficiency defeats the social impulses that learners have. Architect Geoffrey Freeman says "the library is the only centralized location where new and emerging information technologies can be combined with traditional knowledge resources in a user-focused, service-rich environment that supports today's social and educational patterns of learning, teaching, and research" (3). Speaking of academic libraries in particular, he goes on to say "by cutting across all disciplines and functions, the library also serves a significant social role . . . Upon entering the library, the student becomes part of a larger community – a community that endows one with a greater sense of self and higher purpose" (6).

Umberto Eco raised this issue back in 1981 on the opening of the Communal Library of Milan. "What ends, certain and uncertain, does a library serve?" he asked. In exploring that question, he described two libraries. One is a nightmare with a great many rules. The information desk for readers must be inaccessible. Borrowing should be discouraged. Request slips should have

insufficient room for call numbers, thus allowing the employee at the desk to return the slip to be properly filled out. Interlibrary loans should be impossible, or take months. Hours of opening should coincide with working hours, as determined by labor unions. Refreshments of all kinds will be forbidden. To the extent possible there will be no toilets. Ideally, no reader should be allowed inside the library. Then he describes library utopia. Apart from providing good espresso and comfortable chairs, these libraries encourage exploration. He says, "The whole idea of a library is based on a misunderstanding: that the reader goes into the library to find a book whose title he knows. . . . The essential function of a library . . . is to discover books of whose existence the reader has no idea." This discovery is a collaboration between the seeker and the shelves, a mix of deliberation and serendipity. "This sort of library is made for me. I can pass a whole joyful day there. I read the papers, I take some books to the bar, I fetch others, I make discoveries. I entered to work, in true empirical English fashion; instead I find myself among commentators on Aristotle, I wind up on the wrong floor, I go into a section, say Medicine, in which I never thought to stray, and suddenly I stumble upon works about Galen, full of philosophical references. This way, a library is an adventure" (59).

This kind of information seeking is hardly efficient, yet it is this inefficient venturing from the known to the unknown that underpins exploration and discovery. And it is, like any exploration, a spatial experience. A library is very much like a map, one that can help us figure out where we are now and what we have yet to experience; it lets us venture beyond our experience by combining our senses with the experiences of others, and it gives us an idea of the distances involved. According to cartographer Denis Wood, "the map presents us with the reality we know is differentiated from the reality we see and hear and feel. The map doesn't let us see anything, but it does let us know what others have seen or found out or discovered, others often living but more often dead, the things they learned piled up in layer on top of layer so that to study even the simplest-looking image is to peer back through ages of cultural acquisition. . . . The world we take for granted - the real world - is made like this, out of the accumulated thought and labor of the past" (6-7).

Maps, which have been around as long as if not longer than writing, represent our relationship to space, both known and unknown. In the words of Miles Harvey, "A map provides no answers. It only suggests where to look: discover this, reexamine that, put one thing in relation to another, orient yourself, begin here . . ." (38). The medieval map of the world was a way of situating oneself in the cosmic order, a mix of history, myth, and scripture. A 13th century map puts Jerusalem in the center, the known worlds of Europe, Africa and Asia around it. It's also a map of past and present: the last judgment is at the top, with Adam and Eve just below God - sort of the Alpha and the Omega. At the margins, there are various monstrosities - marvelous wonders who had to keep retreating to the margins throughout the Age of Exploration. What is my place, and what lies beyond? Is the question maps address. There are other ways of perceiving these relationships - the heavens as depicted in the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, with God, again, presiding at the top - or the order of the civil world as depicted by Elizabeth I, who naturally puts herself in charge. Consider an Australian Aboriginal map that provides in the shape of a crocodile references to places and traditional knowledge, a network of meaning that relates the people to the natural world. Or a map of the cosmos in the shape of a human being from the Jain tradition in India, which shows the path of individuals as they ascend toward perfect knowledge. Or we can map out order and relatedness by other means - such as the Library of Congress Classification system.

The humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan described the importance of experience in constructing our understanding of reality. Through sensory experience, we reach out beyond ourselves and know what is beyond us. We use our experience of place to imagine how things might be in places we've never been. Because we are rooted in personal, sensory experience, that sense of place belongs to us in a way that imparted knowledge doesn't. As Tuan points out, "learning is rarely at the level of explicit and formal knowledge." It's not just about information, it's about how our experience helps us connect ideas.

“Place is security, space is freedom,” Tuan says. “We are attached to the one and long for the other.” In order to conceptualize space - that is, to understand what we don’t yet know - we must be able to locate ourselves in relation to the world first by being rooted in personal experience. Knowing our place gives us a reference point for experiencing space. The library, as a physical place, provides the coordinates by sorting out knowledge in a grid that can be perceived as having meaning, if not all meanings. Without a sense of belonging in a centered and known (if necessarily limited) world of knowledge, the vast space of the unknown is harder to explore because we feel inevitably disoriented and lost.

Sven Birkerts uses a cartographic metaphor when he argues that the printed book can provide a better sense of connectedness than its digital counterpart. “Reading from a screen,” he says, “is like traveling from coast to coast with only adjoining local maps as guides.” Because everything in cyberspace is potentially adjacent to everything else, it exists with no context, no depth of field, no perspective. Without the physical experience of place in relation to space, it’s hard to know where we stand. There’s also a communal experience in libraries that emboldens us to explore the unknown; as Ken Bruffee has said, “reading is one way to join new communities, the ones represented by the authors of the texts we read. By reading, we acquire fluency in the language of the text and make it our own. Library stacks, from this perspective, are not a repository; they are a crowd” (qtd. In Bennet, 19).

Eratosthenes was the first person to measure the earth at around 200 b.c., and it was remarkably close to our present measurements. He also was one of the first to create a map of the world, even though he was not himself an explorer. He was, instead, the head of the Great Library of Alexandria, where he attempted to encompass the world on paper by gathering together all of human knowledge. Both maps and libraries set themselves a paradoxical task: to encompass all knowledge, knowing that it will be by definition incomplete. “We organize information on maps in order to see our knowledge in a new way,” according to Miles Harvey. “As a result, maps suggest explanations; and while explanations reassure us, they also inspire us to ask more questions, consider other possibilities. To ask for a map is to say, ‘Tell me a story’” (11).

This isn’t to say there’s a single, true story. Maps can present order in different ways, such as representing populations, and they can turn our expectations on its head as in the “Upside Down” map published New Zealand. And while a map may seem to nail down the shape of a coast, the distance from one point to another, that all depends. Mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot noticed that encyclopedias gave figures for the length of the coastline of Britain that varied by as much as twenty percent. He came to an interesting conclusion: the length of the coastline of Britain is infinite. It all depends on how you measure it. The smaller the ruler, the more intricacies you can measure, and so the greater the sum of those measurements.

In a similar way, a library’s means of ordering knowledge are open-ended and provisional. They map knowledge in a way that seems to offer order, but actually invites dissent by bringing together texts that tell each story differently. As Alberto Manguel puts it in his history of reading, “The categories that a reader brings to a reading, and the categories in which that reading itself is placed—the learned social and political categories, and the physical categories into which a library is divided—constantly modify one another in ways that appear, over the years, more or less arbitrary or more or less imaginative . . . Whatever categories have been chosen, every library tyrannizes the act of reading and forces the reader—the curious reader, the alert reader—to rescue the book from the category to which it has been condemned.” This is a subversive rescue mission to which the library is party, I hasten to add. After all, if the library truly wanted order it would have one ultimate book on each topic. There it is—your answer. But that is precisely what libraries don’t do. Instead, they celebrate the multiplicities of meaning by seeking out dissention and putting it together, inviting the explorer to make their own meaning of it.

So how do we go from the temple of books, through the efficient information factory, and into a

new sort of library? Scott Bennett, librarian emeritus of Yale University, calls for a rather startling paradigm shift. He urges us to stop thinking in terms of service, and focus instead on learning. "Our purpose," he says, "is not to circulate books, but to ensure that the circulation of knowledge produces learning. Reconceiving our purposes involves a fundamental shift for librarians trained in a service culture – one that is comparable to the shift that faculty are making from a teaching to a learning culture" (11). He urges us to engage in library planning that is not focused on provision of services at all, but rather on how people learn.

Now, how does this apply to public libraries and to adult learners? As I said earlier, the claims that academic librarians make that information literacy serves as the groundwork for lifelong learning have not been well substantiated. But that, I believe, is partly due to narrowness of vision. We focus too much on the ability to find and use information, not on the other kinds of learning that happens in libraries. Catherine Sheldrick Ross has made the case that much information is not sought at all, but rather is encountered, and that the experiences that readers have that appear not to be "educational" in nature can profoundly affect their knowledge base. She interviewed over 200 avid readers to learn how they read and what it means to them. Her results demonstrate that learning happens in a variety of ways as readers connect books to their life experiences. "Over and over, in these studies based on self-reports, readers say: 'Books give me comfort; make me feel better about myself; reassure me that I am normal and not a freak because characters in books have feelings like mine ... Books help me clarify my feelings; change my way of thinking about things ... They broaden my horizons; provide a window onto other lives and other societies; and they put me in touch with a larger, more spacious world'" (163)

I'll illustrate this with a couple of quotations. First, from the conclusion of *The Child that Books Built*, Francis Spufford's memoir of paradoxically finding himself as a child while lost in a book. His escape into books was partly a response to his sister's chronic illness, and the book ends when his sister's life is over – and the rest of the story, he tells us, is none of our business. Except, he recounts how one scene repeats itself, again and again, no matter how much self-knowledge he gains: "My heart is broken. I have lost my life's jewel. I go into a bookshop. And as I walk down the aisles, I remember that in every novel there are reverses, that all plots twist and turn, that sadness and happiness are just the materials that authors use, in arrangements I know very well; and at that thought the books seem to kindle into a kind of dim life all around me, each one unfolding its particular nature into my awareness without urgency, without haste, as if a column of gray, insubstantial smoke were rising from it, softening the air, filling it with words and actions which are all provisional, which could be changed for others, according to taste. Among those drifting pillars, the true story of my life looks no different; it is just a story among stories, and after I have been reading a while, I can hardly tell anymore which is my own" (210).

Or take this reading experience, from Gregg Bottoms's harrowing memoir of his brother's schizophrenia, *Angelhead*: "At some point - I can't pinpoint exactly when - I realized that books made sense of the worst things, even if they seemed stunted and dark, offering nothing but a crippled epiphany . . . I began reading all the time, endlessly, book after book, always looking to find the grand tragedy rendered with meaning - the more transgressive, the more violent, the better because by the middle of the book I wanted to see how this mess would be fixed, how a life, even a sad, broken, imaginary life, could be saved. I started to believe - and I still believe - that I could somehow save myself with a story, and even though I couldn't save anyone else, I could try to understand them, attempt to grant them at least that, and perhaps it is in this, this attempt to understand, that a person is truly saved . . . I am not exaggerating when I say books saved my life; or put another way, books saved my mind and helped me to understand my life" (104, 106).

So there is a lot of learning here that has little to do with information, and less to do with the methods we teach for seeking it. In describing the joint-use library that functions as both the main library of San Jose's Public Library system and the library of San Jose State University, Christina Peterson identifies five activities that its shared space supports: information-seeking,

recreation, teaching and learning, connection, and contemplation. I would argue that exploration of the world, whether through formal information-seeking or through reading for pleasure, connection, and contemplation are all aspects of learning that libraries support.

I'll end with a map of my personal virtual library, the one I carry in my memory. It is not a clean or well-lighted place. Its ceilings are low, the stacks a maze. The sputtering florescent lights shed stingy light through the mysterious tunnels of books. There's an odd corner tucked beside a stairwell where a tall, arched window has panes of glass so old the bubbles trapped in it hold hundred-year-old air. The wavy striations in the glass warp the campus outside where the trees forever wear autumn colors. In front of the window there is a long wooden table. I have claimed it like a settler, marking my possession with a pile of books and papers and, having claimed it as my own, can make forays into the stacks between bouts of reading, daydreaming, doodling.

The dingy, overcrowded university library where I spent countless undergraduate hours is only a memory now, replaced several years ago by one that is airy and bright and full of computers. But it's where I found a sense a sense of place, a confidence in the possibility of order so that I could grapple with disorder and the unknown. Because I have wandered through physical stacks, seen connections, observed how books on the "same" subject can approach it so differently, I have the rough outlines of a map of what I know and what I have yet to discover. And where the map fades out into areas that are truly terra incognita, I have developed through familiarity with a physical library a sense of direction, a feel for the cardinal points, that I can use as I explore new lands.

Though the wavy window glass is gone, students attending my alma mater still can claim some personal corner near a window where they can assemble books and printouts, set up their laptop and ipod and cup of coffee, forbidden in my day, and daydream while watching the leaves turn color outside. It will leave its imprint in their memory and become their virtual library. At least I hope so.

Our libraries are places that learners lay claim to as a base camp, cartographers beginning an adventure into the unknown. We only need to welcome them inside so they can find a table and a window and made it their own.

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