The Point-and-Click Generation Goes to the Library: How Academic Libraries Adapt to Changing Expectations

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Abstract: Umberto Eco once described two kinds of libraries: one designed to hide books and discourage readers, and another that makes discovery an adventure. Current perceptions of academic libraries and of student research habits seem to mirror this dichotomy. Though a controversial article in The Chronicle of Higher Education suggested many academic libraries were "deserted," building projects have not declined, and on many campuses, the library has gained new prominence as a site for learning. While some studies suggest undergraduates use the Web for most of their research, others report traditional print materials and face-to-face reference help remain important. What are we to make of these conflicting views? Drawing from interviews with students, national surveys on how students use libraries and the Internet, and on what we know about the challenges of undergraduate research, we'll explore the place of the library in higher education and what the library as a place means to our students.

In a speech given at the opening of a library in Milan back in 1981, Umberto Eco started out by asking the simple question: what are libraries for? Though he posed that question before the Internet had altered the information landscape, it's a question we ask ourselves often, sometimes defensively. The identity of the library - and what it's good for - is changing as electronic sharing of texts changes the ways people seek and use information. Yet in the past four or five years we've seen signs that the library has an enduring purpose and presence as a physical place. Today what I'd like to do is examine what we know about our students' perceptions of research and try to see these places as much as possible from their perspective - and to think about ways academic libraries are making themselves more accessible to their target audience.

We all have feelings about libraries – one hopes mostly positive ones. In Umberto Eco's discussion of what libraries are for, he contrasted two kinds of libraries—one is a "huge nightmare" with many rules including these:

- The catalog must be as difficult to use as possible.
- The stacks are closed and books must be requested by filling out forms which will have spaces too small for the information required.
- Interlibrary loan should take months.
- Hours of opening should be restricted to the hours that most of the public are at work.
- Refreshments are forbidden
- To the extent possible there will be no toilets
- Ideally, no reader should be allowed inside the library.

Though this may to reduce complaints about libraries to the absurd, I see hints of my own library in this nightmare. Our students, for example, find the catalog difficult to use and wish we were open when they're wide awake - at three a.m. On the other hand, we long ago conceded on the refreshment issue, and we have no shortage of toilets.

To this nightmare library, Eco contrasts a better version, one that provides a universe on a human scale, a library where the reader can wander at will through the stacks, where there are comfortable armchairs, espresso is served, and accidental discoveries are encouraged. "This sort of library is made for me. I can pass a whole joyful day there . . . This way, a library is an adventure" (59).

A few years ago there was a controversial feature in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* with a vivid graphic of students fading away in the stacks. The headline was alarmist: "The Deserted Library." Many of us looked around and said "not my library." But there's no arguing that more information provided by libraries - or simply available on the Internet - is available from outside the library's walls and many of the questions that used to be asked at reference desks are answerable online.

Interestingly, since the article was published, book circulation is on the rise in all types of libraries and library construction and renovation has not declined. To introduce an online colloquy on the deserted library issue the reporter, Scott Carlson, posed these questions, ones still worth asking ourselves:

- What effect has the Internet had on the way students learn?
- What role can faculty play in helping to bring students to the library?
- In the information age, what is the role of the college library, traditionally the intellectual and social heart of campus?

The year after that *Chronicle* story ran, several large-scale studies were published that attempted to answer that first question: what effect has the Internet had on students. One for OCLC was conducted by Harris Interactive; over 1,000 students were surveyed. Another by the Pew Internet and American Life Project was conduced by a University of Chicago team; over 2,000 students were surveyed, others observed at ten Chicago institutions using ethnographic methods. Finally, a study conducted by Outsell for the Digital Library Federation and the Council on Library and Information Resources surveyed over 3,000 students and faculty.

These studies suggest that though we all hear claims that students only use the Web, the research does not bear this out. Among the somewhat surprising findings of these studies are these points:

- 89% of students report using print resources for at least some of their research (OCLC)
- Accuracy of information is important to students (OCLC)
- 73% of students report using Internet more than the library to find information; 9% use library more (Pew)
- Students prefer face-to-face interaction with librarians and faculty when they need help (OCLC and Pew)
- 80% of students and faculty say the Internet has changed the way they use libraries (Outsell) - *but* -
- Two-thirds of students and faculty say they have not decreased their use of libraries (Outsell)

Findings from smaller-scale studies fill in some of the details and offer a more intimate glimpse into student perspectives. Barbara Valentine's work with undergraduates, teasing out their values through focus groups, told us there is a utilitarian aspect to research - students will look for the most efficient route to completing research tasks. In some sense this is not news to any of us - but what is new is the reasoning behind it. It reveals something we need to bear in mind: the messages we send through assignments will be closely read. What we don't require will naturally get less effort than that which we explicitly do. It's unreasonable to expect students to do work simply because, in some vaguely articulated way, "it's good for you" - or for them to infer without direction what *is* good for them.

Philip Davis and others at Cornell examined research paper bibliographies from 1995 to 2001 and found - surprise, surprise - that students couldn't be counted on to cite scholarly sources unless they were told they had to. Not only do you have to say "you must use quality sources," you need to explain what that means.

Vicki Burton and Scott Chadwick surveyed students in a quantitative study to find out how they chose sources. They learned that the traditional research paper assignment is still ubiquitous, that most students use both print and Internet sources, and - in their research population of over 500 students - that the percentage of students who only use library sources is the same as those who only use the Internet (quite a different result than the Pew study). Students with training in evaluating Web sites are less likely to use them as sources than those without training. And finally, they found that though student do evaluate their sources, they don't invest as much commitment to those choices as do experts - that, rather than a courtship between writers and their sources, it's more of a one-night-stand - which, given Valentine's findings, is not really surprising.

A dozen years ago I interviewed a small number of students about their research processes. I wasn't satisfied that the process librarians typically described - moving from general to specific, from encyclopedias to books to articles and so forth - had anything to do with reality, and I was curious how writing and library research intersected. The students I interviewed told me that finding a focus is a time-consuming and tricky part of the process, that finding tools aren't always the best route to good sources, that browsing and tracing cited works play an important and often overlooked role, and that the entire process of research and writing is recursive and interconnected, not distinct and separate stages. I recently used the same script of questions and interviewed another group of students to see if the process has fundamentally changed since the Web and the multitude of online subscription sources have come on the scene. Though I haven't finished coding these interviews, I'm struck by how little the process they describe has changed, even though the tools have. Students often expressed strong preference for books and journal articles over Web sources, though for some projects the web provided just what they needed. They sometimes used the Web in the initial stage of topic formulation and then abandoned it. They typically used browsing and tracing citations with more confidence than database searching. And they printed out every source they used - or used book darts or sticky notes to keep track of parts of books. They needed hardcopy to jot on, mark up, tag, and physically sort into categories in order to use their sources. They used quite elaborate coding techniques to keep track of what was important. And, consistent with Davis's findings, they were very much guided by their professors' prompts.

In short, these smaller-scale studies suggest that faculty, indeed, are key to drawing students into the library because students do research in response to faculty cues. It may be the case that faculty in the disciplines need to rethink their assumptions, given students now arrive at college far more familiar with searching the Web than with searching libraries, and given the greater diversity of materials available will have to be more explicit about what constitutes a good source. But I'm not sure that faculty have to bend over backwards to persuade students to use the library instead of the Web. What they need to do is something that has always been needed - to help students read all texts more critically and to understand the purpose and the process of research as a form of discovery. We observe students struggling to find and use information; faculty often only have the results to work with. If we combine forces we should be able to come to a better understanding of what's really going on.

Now that third question that Scott Carlson posed: "In the information age, what is the role of the college library, traditionally the intellectual and social heart of campus?"

To tackle that one, let's return for a moment to Eco's library - not the nightmare, but the one that is an adventure. Like Eco, our students want to have refreshments as they use the library, they want to be comfortable, they want to be able to browse freely (both online and in real space), something particularly important to undergraduates because they can't seek information they don't know exists and don't know enough about their topic to give it a name. Browsing gives them a chance to scope out the possibilities, to dabble, to explore, to make unexpected discoveries.

Libraries as places speak to those who use them. Their architecture is calculated to express something to the reader about their relationship to the library and what it contains. In the great nineteenth century libraries, the message was "come inside if you want to be improved." They were public, they were democratic, but they were also monumental, civic statements about an ideal of learning. They dwarf the reader and evoke greatness by using architectural motifs from a classical era or reminiscent of a cathedral.

The New York Public Library's Fifth Avenue building is a civic monument framed by rather arrogant-looking lions, but they have become domesticated over time, and the imposing steps leading up to the front door are a favorite picnic spot for those who work in Midtown Manhattan.

The Suzzallo Library at the University of Washington uses a different language - an ecclesiastical one. The library suggests readers are part of a Western tradition, and the reading room looks like the nave of a Gothic cathedral, telling the reader that they are engaged in something spiritual and significant.

The new Seattle Public Library is a daringly different building that nevertheless is designed to send a message. In this design, the books shelved as a single sequence, a unified spiral of knowledge; the reference and public

computing areas are the "mixing chamber" - where interdisciplinary knowledge can come together and librarians can collaborate with researchers.

Chicago opted for another approach when they opened the Harold Washington Library Center in 1991, the largest public library in the world. This traditional, massive building evokes nineteenth century libraries and was chosen, according to one of the committee members reviewing proposals, because it was the only design submitted that looked like a library.

One way libraries have adapted to change is to include more technology. This is in part because so much of the library is only available now through computers, but is also a recognition that libraries are places where working on computers makes sense. It's part of the library's tradition to be a place where people spend time together even if they're working alone on various projects. In fact, modern "information commons" sometimes look very much like traditional reading rooms - long ranges of desktops, designed for individual study in a common room.

The technology that some believed would replace libraries has simply moved *into* the library. (The fact that Marquette University, when it built a new library, intentionally left the books in another building is an interesting riff on this idea; technology presumably supports learning; books are simply inventory.) In a recent *Library Journal* feature, "Library 2.0," Andrew Albanese commented on the popularity of information commons in academic libraries. "Thanks to new, technology-driven models, more and more campus libraries offer a mix of traditional resources, technology, instruction, and collaborative and social space. They serve an ever-expanding role in supporting an institution's curriculum."

Though this is true - on our campus computer labs in other buildings have been closed due to lack of traffic; students want to do their computing in the library - I'm not sure it's still "technology driven" I'd rather reconceptualize this "commons" as Scott Bennett does in a recent CLIR report - as a "learning commons." Even before computers, the library was the intellectual common ground of the institution, where the knowledge of all disciplines meets and mingles, ownership dissolves, boundaries fall away - and learning has always been what libraries are for.

Fundamentally, learning isn't about use of tools, it's a social experience. We should make it easier for our students to conceptualize research as a social act, not simply manipulating inert bits of information and documenting where those bits came from. It's important when we draw them into research that we don't send the wrong message - e.g. that research is transcription - because they will take the message to heart.

The concept of an information commons is centered on tools and specialists; the learning commons concept is focused on social needs and is student-centered. One library director Bennett interviewed 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." This reminds me again of Eco's library-as-adventure. It's the universe, but on a human scale.

Certainly Linfield College has drawn on this social perspective in their new library. There are long tables for quiet study, places for group work, and comfortable seating - even a fireplace! Clearly, though technology is present, at Linfield the library is about learning.

What we want to do with our libraries is make students comfortable with this strange, hybrid print and digital world of ours by incorporating some of the traditional messages of past libraries - the ones Barnes and Nobles has used to such great effect in their bookstores - with the technology our students need, We want to do it in a way that says to students: this is a place you want to be. This is yours. You have citizenship in the realm of knowledge.

A couple of weeks ago when I was working at night in the library and the place was buzzing with students talking, studying, playing games, playing with databases, eating, yawning, writing, reading, and doing many of these things more or less simultaneously, I was thinking about how odd it is that research papers, which are very hard to write well, remain the most commonly-assigned writing genre in colleges. And how seriously, even grimly, they go about it. Research is not play, it's hard work. And moreover, it's work that has rules that, if you break

them, you'll find yourself in deep trouble. Though students often get excited about what they're learning through the process, when it comes to writing it up they tend to shut down, lose some of that enthusiasm, think in fact enthusiasm is out of place and inappropriate. This seems all wrong, since research is really a kind of formalized fooling around. At its best and most creative, it's playful.

In the print version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "play" occupies over ten pages of definitions and examples. The meanings of the word include "freedom or room for movement," "to ridicule or mock," "to set in opposition," and "mimetic representation of some action." To play is to exercise freedom, to perform, to engage in games.

Thinking about that, I started to read what anthropologists say about play and found one of Gregory Bateson's Metalogues - short imaginary dialogues that explore some cultural subject. One, "On Games and Being Serious," is a dialogue between a father and daughter.

> "Daddy, are these conversations serious?"
>
> "Certainly they are."
>
> "They're not a sort of game you play with me?"
>
> "God forbid . . . but they are a sort of game we play together" (14)

Here I thought of how like helping students learn to do research this is - a joint effort between two people who aren't exactly equal but who are both involved, both learning. They play the game together. It's serious, but not entirely.

Later in the Metalogue the daughter says "People who cheat just don't know how to play" (14). This struck me as a really good way of looking at student problems with writing research papers. Plagiarizing students often simply do not understand the rules (which are complex). They think research is all about getting other people to say what you want to say and making sure you give them credit. Though they may be pretty good at "playing the game" as they understand it, they're not having much fun. They're too busy trying to follow the rules. Bateson's metalogue goes on with the daughter saying,

> "Wouldn't it be a good thing if we had a few more rules and obeyed them more carefully? Then we might not get into these dreadful muddles."
>
> "Yes. But wait. You mean that I get us into these muddles because I cheat against rules we don't have. Or put it this way. That we might have rules which would stop us getting into these muddles - as long as we obey them."
>
> "Yes, Daddy. That's what the rules of the game are for."
>
> "Yes, but do you want to turn these conversations into that sort of a game? I'd rather play canasta" (18).

Learning to do research is more than learning a set of rules or mastering technologies. It's learning to play with ideas with some degree of freedom. It's pushing an idea beyond the known into the unknown. It's risk-taking, not rule-following. And it is fundamentally social, open-ended, exploratory. As another cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, has said, the function of play is interpretive.

This need for social space, for places where people can interact with ideas, has architectural implications. A new building has just opened on the MIT campus. It's not a library, it will house computer science and artificial intelligence labs, the information systems program, and the philosophy and linguistics departments, but it made me think about library spaces which are also a kind of lab and classroom. The architect, Frank Gehry, said to a *New York Times* reporter it "looks like a party of drunken robots got together to celebrate."

This building is designed to be playful and to encourage flexible use of common space for collaboration and social interaction in order to foster new ideas. The new design incorporates lots of common space and transparency among offices to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.

It is in part a response to a student life report that MIT had too few places to interact and that computer clusters were being used social spaces. Interestingly, technology per se is little in evidence. There are no massive computer labs - everything is wireless and according to one architectural advisor, "the better technology becomes, the less obtrusive it is.It's built "around people, instead of around technology" (Chronicle, A30). The interior spaces are designed to enable unexpected views and to bring people together.

The place for this kind of playful interaction is the library, where technology and texts can be turned loose with students in ways that encourage them to interact not just with each other but with ideas. Philosopher Michael Oakshott described knowledge this way:

> "...we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation that goes on in public and within each of ourselves . . . And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance" (490-91)

Libraries are *great* places to learn how to participate in that conversation.

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