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Library as Agent of [Re]Contextualization

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Vika Zafrin, Jack Ammerman, Garth Green

Boston University

All of us here have been swept up in the whirlwind. The speed of producing, propagating and consuming information in our digital culture is staggering, and is often accompanied by the atomization of this information. [slide] Once digitized, bits of knowledge can easily be presented out of context. This is both good and bad: a piece of information lends itself more explicitly to being used in different, perhaps unexpected contexts; *but* it may be difficult to find, if its originating context is absent.

In his book *Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder*, David Weinberger presented three orders, or levels, of ordering. [slide] First order he likened to arranging books on a shelf, working with the objects themselves. [slide] Second order is making objects to represent other objects, where each *representative* object refers to one and only one *primary* object (but the reverse doesn't hold: a book can have several catalog cards, for example).

[slide] *Third* order doesn't presume *any* object to exist in only one place at a time. Weinberger writes, "The problems with the first two orders of order go back to the fact that they arrange atoms... The third order removes the limitations we've assumed were inevitable in how we organize information." Both content, and information about it, exist in bits. Metadata can be modular, their elements recombined to refer to more than one primary object. We can have metadata more voluminous than the data they describe.

At the Boston University School of Theology Library, Jack Ammerman convened a research and development group to discuss and respond to this problem of de-contextualized information and the concepts of ordering. Members of that group authored this talk.

The breakdown I described, this graduated difference between the things being ordered and the entities that order them, is hardly new. Garth Green is a philosopher and theologian who recently accepted a half-time position in the Library to help us to craft our response to the times. Early on in the discussions, Garth noted that the 13th-century philosopher Bonaventure presented three possible "positions of thought." [slide] These positions are: *extra se* (in which the mind views an outside object), *intra se* (a *reflectio*, or a 'thought about [an achieved] thought') and *supra se* (where we examine the principles behind our own classification and organization of observed knowledge). Bonaventure had systematized the tripartite structure of theology (sensible, symbolic and speculative) that he had inherited from such philosophers and theologians as Plotinus, Augustine, and pseudo-Dionysius.

The compelling common aspect of the third order of order and the *supra se* position of thought is recombination, re-iteration, a multiple contextualization of knowledge. Libraries have traditionally dwelt in the second order of order. *We* have been imagining the institution of the Library as a locus for third-order processes. We imagine the library as responsible for three spaces – physical, virtual and programmatic. In our discussions we have re-conceived the *programmatic* functions of the Library; the physical space of the Library as *workshop* oriented; and the virtual space of the Library by thinking of collection development as a third-order activity based on the mash-up principle. This refashioned, multifaceted institution is an entity that not just *enables research*, but *engenders* and even *generates* new knowledge by way of a new physical and conceptual structure.

[slide] **<u>Interdisciplines and the Subject Area Library</u>**

We understand the pedagogical role of the Theology Library to include not only its function as repository of past theological negotiations and positions, but as an agent responsible for generating future theological possibilities. Academies have in the past somewhat marginalized people whose work problematized past disciplinary decisions and encouraged future acts of interdisciplinary engagement. This happened for a good and obvious reason. The strong disciplinary boundaries established in the past several hundred years came about as a result of dialogue and recorded presence, and naturally have inertia to counteract change. But the net result has been that some scholars' work has fallen through the cracks of insufficient attention—in our case, attention to work that exists in the spaces between the medieval and the modern mindset, between philosophy and theology.

[slide] One example of this is the German philosopher and theologian Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who was widely understood to be one of the most important philosophers of his century but who, at least in Anglophone scholarship, is seldom studied. Fichte was the most influential early follower of Kant, who had been widely thought to have refuted theology by attacking previous theological claims to knowledge, and by establishing a thoroughly a-theological theory of knowledge and experience. Fichte, beginning from Kantian principles, re-appropriated traditional theological concepts, and incorporated them within a self-consciously modern, philosophical understanding of the nature and limits of possible experience. But Fichte was *too* theological for the followers of either of his greatest competitors for the self-image of the age, Kant and Hegel. He was also too philosophical for the tastes of many of his fellow German theologians who, after Kant, hoped to develop their theologies independently of philosophical principles. Self-consciously German and

Protestant, he was long ignored by Roman Catholic thought as well. So, because of these disciplinary and doctrinal self-limitations, he became one of the *un*chosen. He falls both within and between many of these limits; but he is invisible to all of them, because of his uncomfortably close position to each of these community's *others* or opponents. For this reason, Fichte becomes interesting to us in the Library as we consider own contribution to the future of interdisciplinarity in theology.

Congregation studies is another example—this time of a concept (and a reality) that coalesced around it a group of disciplinary representatives, united not by their self-identification or method of analysis, but by their willingness to provide a part of a whole conception of the rich social object that is a "congregation." Only by this composite route of inquiry can the congregation be determined in its historical, anthropological, sociological, and theological aspects.

Our library is interested in promoting both of the above instances of interdisciplinary theological work—that centered on Fichte, and discussion around congregation studies. We're particularly well positioned to do this: BU has a long history of this kind of work, one example being the Science, Philosophy, Religion (or SPR) program, which offers three graduate degrees and engages faculty from across the university.

[slide] **Programmatic Space**

Our faculty members have expressed the desire for community in many places and contexts. We wanted to learn what they felt that they lacked and wanted, and whether this desire for engagement could be achieved by, and in, the library. How do we create a physical

community space for faculty in a large institution? How do we get people to engage with *us*, and each *other*, online?

We've realized that both the physical and the virtual spaces of the library are necessarily informed by its programmatic space—the conceptual framework within which we inherit others', and articulate and advance our own, understanding of what the library properly *is* and *does*. This includes both articulating goals (library as a space where new knowledge is generated) and experimenting with tools that may help us achieve those goals (for example, user tagging for online catalog items). By imagining an environment that encourages direct interaction, and then suggesting starting discussion topics, we employ conversation theory (which says that knowledge is *created*, and meanings *agreed* upon, in conversation) to refashion the library as a place that enables *both* process *and* content.

Definitions and classifications have historically been created by field experts, who generally work within disciplinary boundaries, using disciplinary methods. The Library inhabits an essential place within the University as a trans-disciplinary entity. Its, perhaps, unique responsibility is to re-evaluate past decisions about disciplinary boundaries. Collaborative knowledge-gathering technologies allow definitions and structures to emerge from the materials themselves, potentially without regard to their prior classification(s). This emergent knowledge, enabled by programmatic space, informs the way in which reconceptualizing the virtual space will translate into transforming the library's physical space.

[slide] **Physical / Virtual Spaces**

Most library users associate the library's physical space with silent study. With clever layout planning — [slide] maybe re-shuffling stacks to de-emphasize them, and minimizing sound

movement — a library can accommodate multiple spaces for quiet group work in addition to carrels. Round tables, with computers and large-screen monitors, are provided for use and discussion of online resources. The library becomes a constant low-grade workshop space that makes physical and virtual materials equitably available. It's a nice dream.

We're currently creating three topical online resources, which follow from our relatively new understanding of the library as a research venue. [slide] Our History of Missiology site presents an extensive and unique collection of letters, journals, biographies, travel descriptions, and books written by and about protestant missionaries. These materials will be of use both to theologians and to social scientists: they're the earliest anthropological records of several cultures.

We're *also* gathering resources about the Personalism school of thought, which flourished at BU in the early 20th century. It's played an important role in the development of philosophical theology, and its implications are far-reaching in their interdisciplinarity. Personalism hasn't been adequately studied, and connections between it and later philosophical thought haven't been explicitly drawn.

In a related vein of inquiry, our Library has agreed to host the Fichte Society website. [slide] Fichte's work on subjectivity and consciousness is of interest to researchers around BU and beyond it. We're considering hosting a conference that would attract historians, philosophers, and theologians who work on Fichte. Such a conference, held in properly equipped meeting spaces, would produce not open publication of conference papers, but the basis for an online working group dedicated to activities like translating past and present work on Fichte, and elaborating the multivalent significance of his own writings. In this way, the literally

programmatic activity of the conference would inform specific use of the library as a physical space *and* as a networked locus for academic interaction.

Another new service, coming this fall, proposes to expand the very concept of *library*—as a place where one reads, learns and interacts with other knowledge workers—to other physical spaces within our building. This summer we are renovating three of our meeting rooms—a conference room and two classrooms. [slide] We're equipping them with ceiling-mounted projectors, pull-down screens, DVD/video combo players, and probably permanently installed laptops.

We'll offer the use of these rooms to the graduate students in our six degree programs for group work. They'll be able to reserve a room, and will have an option of making a concurrent appointment for a consultation—with the Digital Collections Librarian, and with other digital researchers as they make themselves available. Consultation requests can be on any topic, and on any level of expertise; if we can help them, great; and if not—for example, if they have a GIS question, and we have no GIS-specific expertise at hand—the library can attempt to find people who *would* be qualified and willing to give advice on the topic, and connect them with the working groups.

Given our students' sparse involvement in digital projects so far, we suspect (and hope!) that we'll start out nice and easy: "We're researching topic X, where do we even start, besides Google?" Or, "This is the general shape of our argument, what tools could we use to present it, besides oral delivery and slides?"

Classroom reservations for group work are already available at many universities. The idea of *consultations* arose primarily out of my perusal of the website for the [slide] University of Virginia Scholars' Lab, and the conversation its director Bethany Nowviskie and I had about its operations. They're an impressive outfit that grew very gradually out of the work of several small centers that, over the years, have worked side by side in the UVA library. Some of these centers, along with their staff, got folded into the Scholars' Lab, which today has a dozen experts and half again as many graduate student fellows available for consultation.

We don't have the staff nor the space and equipment it took Scholars' Lab fifteen years and multiple smaller centers to gather. But we *can* take their operating ideas and apply them on a different scale. The help and resources we can offer have the advantages of being diffuse, and happening within the pervasive context of specific coursework. So again, the library creates a series of programmatic opportunities for students and their faculty to engage with new media as a playground for scholarly collaboration.

This has multiple effects on the use of physical space at STH. This is true of spaces both inside and outside of the *library*. Re-purposing classrooms to use as net- and A/V-enabled study spaces outside of classtime adds to the total volume of space in which students, librarians and faculty can interact. And it *also* takes group work outside of our library's reading room, which is overloaded with conflicting needs at peak times.

[slide] **Collection Development and Cataloging**

Approaching collection development as a third-order activity, we consider the number of books on shelves one, but not the sole, determining factor of a collection's strength. We hope that the interdisciplinary groups we gather around the library will participate in collection

development *along* with library staff. If knowledge can be built up, mapped, by free (informed) association, then library collections can be developed in a similar way.

A series of meetings dedicated to the revival of Personalism may attract theologians, philosophers, historians and sociologists. Each scholar will bring knowledge of different relevant resources to the table, and in discussion draw out a coherent and comprehensive body of knowledge the community believes to be essential to its work. Through this process we would create a more participatory and connected relationship both between researchers across their disciplinary boundaries, and between the library and these people's respective research programs.

With the advent of electronic cataloging, libraries have been slowly moving towards the third order of order. Mostly, libraries still catalog physical objects; only very recently have we begun digitizing those objects, and faced the existence of born-digital artifacts also in need of cataloging. Momentum is difficult to influence: even with digital objects, libraries fall into cataloging patterns typical of physical artifacts. Developing referral systems, social tagging, and so on, will be required for an accurate representation of these complex and structurally novel entities.

We're considering such tools also in the context of the institutional repository we're building at BU. Many of you know of BU's recent decision to go open-access; the library system, in collaboration with BU's Office of Information Technology, is responsible for the creation and maintenance of the IR. Some aspects of developing a repository are not unlike more traditional library collection development, and each of these two thinking paths informs the

other. Further, because the repository's success hinges on input from all sectors of BU, our role in it is crucial to our evolving self-conception as a library system within the university.

Moving Forward: Assessment and Implementation

For the project of refashioning the research process to succeed, a crucial component is an outreach coordinator who is also a scholar in the field. This would be a person who rallies the researcher troops and continually spurs conversation. Without such a constant external stimulus, and with so many other demands on their time and attention, researchers are less likely to participate in – or initiate – discussion.

This sort of rallying can and should be institutionalized. With a dedicated driving force behind them, brown-bag seminars, lecture or presentation series and discussion lists can be a thriving ground for exploring ideas. Such efforts have so far been led by dedicated individuals, and often at digital humanities centers. The library as an institution is well positioned to join in as a venue for scholarly communication, given adequate staffing and support.

The criteria according to which we can evaluate *ourselves* are measurable in at least two categories. First is our ability to effect new conceptions of "collection development"—ones that include digital objects, projects and research tools. And second is our ability to promote and embody new understandings of physical space *as* library, understandings that don't limit themselves to the physical space *of* the library.

[slide] **Conclusion: BU and Cyberinfrastructure**

In our abstract, we promised to address recommendations from "Our Cultural Commonwealth," the final report of the ACLS Commission on Cyberinfrastructure. [slide] Here's part of its table of contents. The highlighted areas represent goals that BU is currently pursuing.

All of our digital production will be *freely and perpetually accessible*, and this includes both materials in the institutional repository, and topical digital projects that we pursue. The interest and substantial investment of resources that the BU administration has shown in recent years are encouraging with regard to *sustainability*. We're using free and open-source tools where we can, aiming for *interoperability*. All of the activities and conversations I described today are directed at *facilitating collaboration* and *supporting experimentation*, with an eye to *encouraging digital scholarship*. We're developing institutional policies as part of our work on the IR, and the library system is being reorganized to ensure solid *leadership* from all areas of inquiry, including—prominently—the humanities and social sciences. We're documenting everything we're doing and are committed to *open standards*; and of course, as twenty-first century scribes, we are developing *digital collections*.

Things get bumpy as the many ideas and interests required to make this work converge and sometimes conflict with each other. But we have institutional support, and the momentum is becoming self-reinforcing, and we're putting a lot of thought into what we do and how we do it—complete with self-imposed deadlines. With regard to both moving forward and doing so with integrity, we'll be counting on the university's community, and on you, to keep us honest.