

The Library-Learner Dynamic in a Changing World

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MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN concerning the rate of change, the movement of society from an industrial era into an information age, and the rather startling advances in technological development. The focus of these voyages into literary expression has been primarily global in approach and less attention has been drawn to individual response to external change. Still fewer are the references to the public library's role vis-à-vis its community and client groups. The literature reflects much on automation and technology but generally from an operational perspective. This article will address this perceived gap and center on the library-learner dynamic as it is influenced by a changing world.

Today's World...Tomorrow's Challenge

The reality of today is the reality of change. Few people are unaware that things are changing, but the rate of that change—the acceleration that drives today's changes—is less apparent. As individuals conduct their daily lives, their attention is understandably concentrated on the details of living, and developments in the laboratory seem extremely remote. Occasional references to changes in the workplace, to new types of computers, or to new models of stereo equipment or televisions appear in local newspapers, but the overwhelming needs of everyday life keep such information at a psychological distance.

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However, the winds of change are so pervasive that there is no aspect of life that is not affected by the combination of social and technological forces, and it is unrealistic to adopt an ostrich-like stance, ignoring the certain reality of both change and its acceleration pattern. In an attempt to establish a bridge between present and future, Monroe states that the future's groundwork is laid by the past and by the forces at work upon society and public libraries in the present. Further, she asserts that:

Futurists make no pretense at predicting the future; prophecy is for prophets. Realistically, our interest in the future lies in being able to influence it, not to predict it; to foresee alternatives, and to choose strategies that will give our preferred future a chance to develop. The future provides an opportunity for us to create, once we recognize the strategies needed to influence what happens. For it is obvious analysis alone does not influence the future; it is only as we use the insights gained, in analysis of the forces-at-work, and the preferred future we envision, to devise and carry out strategies of professional action that we can hope to influence the future.¹

If libraries and librarians are to help their clients to prepare for a productive life in a changing world, there is a responsibility factor in Monroe's statement that must be acknowledged. All citizens have a real and fundamental need for coping skills and strategies for influencing their respective futures—a need which is present even in times of minimal change. This need becomes linked to other essential human needs at a very basic level during times of stress, and adapting successfully to change is indeed a time of significant stress.

Coping strategies are required for not only daily living in general but for occupational skills in particular. Occupational obsolescence is an observable and dramatic outcome of a time of swift change, and continuing education and self-development become integral components of career activity. The challenge is to both individuals and potential support systems to create viable mechanisms by which education can mitigate the consequences of incipient obsolescence. The opportunity for public library intervention on behalf of the citizens is unparalleled; the corresponding reward to the library of becoming part of the community mainstream is equally valuable.

Libraries, Learners, and Literacy

Learning takes place both formally and informally, and both approaches can be relevant to the public library mission. Beyond pure experience, however, a basic level of literacy is required in order to

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provide a connection between the learner and the information which is to be learned.

Traditionally, literacy has been viewed in diverse ways. In earlier centuries, to be considered a truly literate individual may have required a knowledge of Greek and/or Latin, as well as the native language. In recent years, literacy has been interpreted as a basic knowledge of reading and writing one's native language to a level at which fundamental skills (such as completing forms) could be accomplished.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *literacy* as "the condition or quality of being literate, especially the ability to read and write." The word *literate* is further defined as: "*adj.*(1) Able to read and write; (2) Knowledgeable; educated; (3) Familiar with literature; literacy; and (4) Well-written, polished, a literate essay—*n.*(1) Someone who can read and write and (2) A well-informed, educated person."

Both historically and, correspondingly, through dictionary definition, literacy has been viewed as print-related. This connection has been further extended today with the concept of computer literacy and the need to acquire a basic familiarity with computer hardware and software—a fundamentally print-oriented process. The relationship between the concept of literacy and the ability to interact successfully with print is readily understood by the education and library communities, and increasing attention is being directed toward public library involvement with literacy efforts.

The reality of today's world that must acknowledge and creatively use accelerating change also dictates that the definition of literacy be broadened. To be truly literate, today's citizen must not only relate to the print media but also to visual and audio media. There are now generations of individuals whose formative years have had significant exposure to radio and television. In addition, computer literacy—as an extension of print literacy—is increasingly cited as being necessary for occupational competence.

Consequently, it follows that literacy efforts should address the broader definition of literacy. Whether the public library is a direct or an indirect partner in the literacy effort, one of the library's services should center around providing access to a wide range of information formats. Programmatic activities encouraging critical analysis could supplement this access function.

Educating for Literacy

If this broadened definition of literacy is accepted as a given, then educational design needs to be reconfigured in order to reflect this

conceptual shift. The audience to be reached would now include not only those with low reading skills, but also the learning disabled and persons who are media-rich but literacy-poor. Whereas English classes have routinely taught strategies for comprehending the main points of sentences, paragraphs, and literary genres, few schools have devoted attention in any depth to critical television watching or critical listening. The skills of critical analysis of the various media need to be an integral part of the educational effort if citizens are to make truly effective use of their learning and informational opportunities.

In addition, Knowles states that:

In an era of knowledge explosion, technological revolution, and a social policy of equality of educational opportunity, [the] definition of the purpose of education and...faith in the power of transmitted knowledge are no longer appropriate...In the world of the future we must define the mission of education as to produce *competent* people—people who are able to apply their knowledge under changing conditions; and...that the foundational competence all people must have is the competence to engage in lifelong self-directed learning.²

Since a significant number of citizens no longer have personal contact with formal classes, there is an opportunity gap to be filled in terms of helping people acquire the skills and competencies necessary for critical analysis of the print, audio, and visual media. Public libraries are in a unique position to use this opportunity to great advantage. Programming addressed to media literacy (including computer literacy) would meet client needs, create visibility for the library and its services, and create a more educated user of library materials.

If the public library were to assume this responsibility, it would be placed in the position of sharing the overall responsibility for literacy with the public educational system. While this could be a frustrating exercise in bureaucratic give-and-take, it could also produce a defined cooperative structure that could be extended to the K-12 configuration as well. An ultimate scenario could be written in which the public library achieves the long overdue recognition from funders and taxpayers—i.e., that the public library's mission is to serve the public from cradle to grave as a basic educational and informational resource and, in that capacity, the library deserves a share of the funding pie commensurate with that role.

Literacy and the Adult

The principles of adult development and adult learning need to be brought to bear upon the interaction of the library and the learner. These principles remain the same whether or not the adult's literacy skills have developed to a high level. For the purposes of this discussion, these principles are categorized in three groups:

1. *Knowles's concept of andragogy differentiates between the art and science of teaching adults (andragogy) and teaching children (pedagogy).* He emphasizes several key points:
 - a. It is a normal aspect of the process of maturation for a person to move from dependency toward increasing self-directedness, but at different rates for different people and in different dimensions of life.
 - b. As people grow and develop they accumulate a reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning...[and] attach more meaning to learnings they gain from experience than those they acquire passively.
 - c. People become ready to learn something when they experience a need to learn it in order to cope more satisfyingly with real-life tasks or problems.
 - d. Learners see education as a process of developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life.³

In other words, the adult, in order to meaningfully engage in a learning experience designed to upgrade literacy skills, needs to work within a process that builds upon past experience, is problem- or task-oriented, and becomes increasingly self-directed. When these elements are omitted from the educational design, the probability of effective learning taking place may decrease.

2. *In addition, each individual should be considered within the context of the whole life span, the changes in role that the living environment creates.* The self is never isolated; rather, it is found in various social roles and sets of responsibilities. Just a few of the "hats" worn in a lifetime include becoming a self, child, sibling, parent, aunt or uncle, friend, citizen, learner, family member, worker, and leisure-time user. In the midst of all these relationships, the adult struggles to become both literate and competent. When physiological or psychological problems intervene, the resultant stress can render a self immobilized to a lesser or greater extent.

3. *The physical, cultural, and emotional aspects of time are of great consequence.* The child lives not only in the present but in the

future, and time seems endless. Adults have more stable interests and are able to internalize long-range goals and work toward them over a period of time. However, many adults (as well as children) live in the here-and-now and will seldom work toward distant goals unless they have a commitment to these goals. To the old, the time that is left may appear very short and to be valued—even hoarded, rather than spent. Therefore, for an adult more than for a child the investment of time in an activity may be as important a decision as the investment of effort or money.⁴

4. *The stages of life provide additional clues to understanding adult learners.* Robinson has synthesized the research of Sheehy, Gould, Levinson, Neugarten, and others into the following outline of adult stage theories:⁵

- a. *Early Adulthood*...the issue of intimacy (relating to other people) vs. isolation.
 1. *Ages 18-22*....Pulling up roots; leaving family; continuing educational preparation; beginning work; handling peer relationships; managing time and money.
 2. *Ages 22-28*....Becoming adult; establishing autonomy; finding a mentor; setting in motion life patterns (mate selection, home ownership, parenthood).
 3. *Ages 28-33*....An age 30 transition time when youthful dreams come to grips with reality; concerns about being too narrow and restricted in life choices; also characterized by a new vitality; often a time of change, turmoil and dissatisfaction; time of reappraisal, searching for personal values.
- b. *Middle Adulthood*...the issue of generativity (a commitment to and caring for the next generation and one's career) vs. stagnation.
 1. *Middle age (35-60)*....most powerful stage in life in terms of earning capacity, influence on people, impact on society.
 2. *Ages 33-38*....Becoming one's own person; establishing one's niche in society; developing competence; reaching out; relating to family, children, friends; conflicting time demands.
 3. *Ages 38-46*....Midlife transition; an unstable time; awareness that time is running out; reassessment of marriage, work; search for meaning; relating to teen-age children and aging parents; reversal between men and women vis-à-vis aggressive work-related and nurturing roles; vulnerability.
 4. *Ages 46-53*....Settling down; formation of new life structure; discovery of ultimate aloneness and personal responsibility for one's life; may be major age 50 transition.
 5. *Ages 53-60*....Renewal or resignation; time of increased personal satisfaction; development of secondary interests in preparation for later years.
- c. *Later Adulthood*...issue of integrity (belief that one's life has had a purpose) vs. despair.
 1. *Ages 60-65*...retirement or anticipation/dread of retirement; especially difficult for those who defined selves by their careers; adjustments to less income; confrontation by loss (of job, home, spouse); expanded avocational interests.

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2. *Ages 65 and up*...phases of retirement (anticipation, euphoria, disenchantment, reorientation, stability); educationally active; have greater zest for living and self-concept; religious beliefs increase; search for meaning of life; reviewing one's life; increased dependence; involvement in the dying process.

These stages illustrate the range of possible adult behaviors and potential at various points in life. It is but a small step to the realization of how these stages would impact adult learning and receptivity to learning.

The stages of adult development can be compared to a series of rapidly taken snapshots. The subject of each photo is the same, but the image varies to a greater or lesser degree—and each snapshot is unique. As a person moves through the life span, personal and environmental conditions change and force changes within the individual. It would be inappropriate to view adults as a homogeneous mass of learners; it is equally inappropriate to view a single adult as a homogeneous personality. Each person is an eclectic series of selves or identities—of snapshots—from birth until death. Further, each person has an individual learning style which responds on a very personal basis to different types of media: some persons learn best through reading print; others interact more positively with audio and/or visual media. When the stresses and pressures of life's stages, of environmental changes, and of personal learning styles are combined, the individuality of the learning process becomes even more pronounced.

The Public Library Response

How, then, can a positive library-learner dynamic be created in this changing world? Knox states that when a change event occurs, the need for some adaptation produces—for some adults at least—a heightened readiness to engage in educative activity. The resulting educative activity may be directly or indirectly related to the change event, and the relation may or may not be recognized by the individual. This period of heightened readiness has been referred to as a teachable moment. The educative activity may include all types of informal information seeking such as reading and talking with others as well as more formal participation in part-time externally sponsored educational programs.⁶

Since libraries are staffed by adults who are caught in the midst of the whirlwind of change both personally and professionally—and also serve adults who are buffeted by the same wind—the opportunities to engage in “teachable moments” can be found on both sides of the reference desk. The vast resources to be found in libraries can be an

impetus to the continuing professional development of staff and to the lifelong learning of the library's users.

From the beginning, libraries have been struggling with setting priorities within the multiple missions of information, education, recreation, and cultural enhancement. The rate of societal and technological change is demanding an increased emphasis on the educational role of libraries, both as complementary to formal education and as the natural home for nontraditional learning. As a neutral, nonthreatening environment for learning, libraries have already created an optimum condition in which learning may take place. Further positive aspects of the library-learner dynamic should be based on collection building which specifically addresses learner needs and programmatic activities designed to facilitate the learning process.

Collections for learners...how are they different? It is hoped that every library seeks to build collections of materials which relate to the requests of their clientele. However, as stated earlier in the discussion on literacy, collections must contain materials in a wide variety of formats—formats that will be in tune with the learning styles of the library users. For libraries which have been print-dominant to the extent that audiovisual materials are considered a supplement or a luxury, a major attitudinal shift is required. It would not be unreasonable to expect an equitable distribution of materials across the range of formats so that information access is truly available to all.

In addition, collections would include self-study materials (in print, audio, computer, and visual formats, of course) and information on educational opportunities to be found locally through both formal and informal sources. College and technical school catalogs would be available as would listings of possible tutors and individuals seeking to study in groups. Postings would be made of educational and cultural events.

Programmatic activities...would build upon the collection resources in such programs as tutoring (i.e., in reading, a subject discipline, a skill), lectures, and discussion groups. Librarians would serve as learners' advisers, counseling independent learners along their progression toward learning goals, and providing referral to other agencies when appropriate. Support groups for learners would be encouraged. The creative imagination can invent numerous activities that would foster the learning experience.

Specific library responses will vary from community to community. Today's library does—and yet does not—resemble the familiar library of yesterday. While acknowledging and building upon its tradition and heritage, the library is moving assertively into a technological

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future that offers the potential for ever more effective resources for learners. Lagging behind these new realities of service, however, are the marketing strategies and expertise that would communicate what is both actual and possible to a frustrated citizenry. The critical key is that the focus be on the learner's or client's need. It is vital that some of the teachable moments for librarians include a heightened awareness of the importance of acquiring the requisite marketing and communication skills that would form the linkages to learners and their needs.

The public library has a unique opportunity today in the history and progression of humankind to forge these linkages and become the support system that will help individuals ride the crest of change to positive and rewarding outcomes. It is a new imperative for public library service.

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