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More than a Mausoleum: The Library at the Forefront of Digital Pedagogy

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Over the last decade, we've witnessed a shift in the ways in both everyday folk and academics encounter the world. The promise of web 2.0 and the rise of the network has seen the input of every individual increase in importance. For universities, the consequences of this go well beyond social media presences or heated debates in comment threads, it challenges the very nature of the ivory towers our universities are constructed on top of. Some of the more nostalgic set have opined about the "death" of the traditional library and how universities need to "Save the stacks." Are we losing the traditional library to chase digital trends?
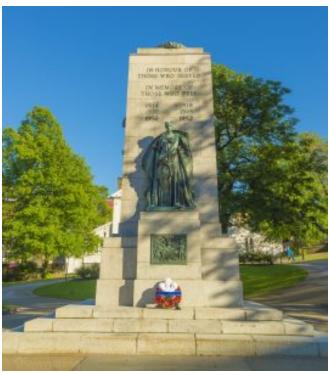

Even I got in on the fun…

No longer are libraries cenotaphs of long dead books but a growing organism contributed, curated, and built by the members of the university community. A focus on digital pedagogy, allows librarians the flexibility to enter this new age of librarianship with a clearer idea of what we'd like the library to be 10, 15, or 20 years from now.

Not a library, a real cenotaph. (Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0)

Rick Anderson tells us it is a commonality amongst new librarians to say that the collection is dead. Rather than death, I think of it as a transition as significant as the one from scroll to codex, or manuscript to print.

I am choosing to illustrate how I see the future of collections shape up in the digital future. Buildings come in different sizes and shapes, staff perform different roles but collections, that is items preserved for use by research are common in most if not all library experiences throughout history. **The collection forms the backbone of our pedagogical role.**

With this in mind what are the principles of digital pedagogy in modern librarianship?

1. **Student voices matter, as much as established ones, in the conversation.**

2. **Access goes beyond the limits of the library and campus**

3. **The future of library is based on student needs both pedagogical and inspirational and the collection needs to mirror this.**

By focusing in on the creation of scholarship by students into collections we are building upon the library's core historical strengths while improving the teaching done in classrooms. We also exhibit examples of student work and learning to the world in perpetuity.

Librarians are often assaulted with comments that "all information is on the internet" and while many have struggled against this assumption and beaten it back in deference to our job security it is a fact that the internet has fundamentally changed the way that we receive information. As Lyman Ross and Pongracz Sennyey comment in "The Library is Dead, Long Live the Library" published in the Journal of Academic Librarianship "the Internet has lowered the cost of propagating information to negligible levels. This fact diminishes the value of local collections and services. Libraries are no longer islands of information."(Ross and Sennyey pg 146)

And as the digital world encroached on the library, as it did on most of our lives and interactions, the edifices faded. First it was the building, allowing access outside of the footprint of the traditional library, then it was the staff who became teachers rather than guardians, what happened to our prized collections?

David Lewis in Reimagining the Academic Library comments that "Until quite recently what constituted the scholarly record seemed clear, or at least we understood that portion that was the library's responsibility." (Lewis 32) But that now we have entered a new stage of ambiguity caused by digital objects. Information Literacy exists against this backdrop of unclear scholarly records.

This has led some researchers, David Lewis included, to argue that the maintenance of non-unique print collections should no longer be a focus of academic institutions. Instead, digital collections, costing significantly less to maintain and often times infinitely more usable and accessible than singular print copies. While a shift away from the collection of books and toward the teaching and the impacting of students is necessary, I argue it is not an end to the collections based approaches that define the library.

While I do not completely agree that our print collections are no longer necessary, our communities are pushing our hands when it comes to demanding access to more digital materials, outside of the building, and off of campus.

The loss of the stacks is mourned by many nervous colleagues. Some of this nervous energy has prompted change in library circles. When the Association of College and Research Libraries introduced a new framework for information literacy, it was met, as all change does, with both praise and scorn.

Part of this framework was a large redefinition of the task of research, which increasingly takes the focus of librarianship away from books and dust and places it into the classroom.

One movement in particular that I believe is of note here is the idea that of "Scholarship as Conversation"

The framework states that "Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations"

Part of this is the necessary focus on citations as a communicative tool between the researcher and the past, but buried in here is the way in which we can use the tools of the digital to promote our student's incorporation into this community.

"New forms of scholarly and research conversations," the framework continues, "provide more avenues in which a wide variety of individuals may have a voice in the conversation."

It is through digital pedagogy that we have the chance to offer our students keys to this conversation, either through publishing, the creation of exhibits, or the production of knowledge itself. Libraries then need to be at the forefront of this transition, from static collections based and traditional "gatekeeper" mentalities to the research driven and student driven collection creation.

While librarians have been quick to reject the gatekeeper mentality, faculty in fields across campus have been hesitant to give up the reins of the academic conversation. Some institutions have had long histories of undergraduate research prior to the age of the internet, it is the openness in the digital world that prompted a revolution in student publishing.

Char Booth explains in "Open Access as Pedagogy" that digital publishing "grants privilege and power to student authors, gives them space to assert their intellectual agency, allows them to enter the academic conversation and…maybe alter some professional paradigms."

Entering this academic conversation encourages students to reject the monolithic scholarly record that dominates our ideas of the University, and telling students their voice matters allows a reconfiguring of the idea of research. The best way to understand research is to conduct it yourself. There are more tangible reasons this is innovative.

Char Booth continues "With that newfound power comes responsibility; with Open Access comes exposure…leads these already ambitious students to dig deeper into primary and secondary sources, to think harder about their meaning and value to their scholarship and to argue more effectively and write more forcefully." (Booth 6)

Feeling that student work is often too "un-polished" or "not up to par" with the rigorous examinations that come after years of graduate school. Some are worried that student work will impact their own standing as professional academics. Bad student work with a faculty name on it reflects poorly on mentorship.

In giving the keys of scholarship to our students we promote not only their work but the University as a whole; much like open access creates exposure for us on the Tenure Track, our students become examples. By opening up the collection to reworking by students we not only improve their education but we break down the barriers that hold new ideas back.

It rejects the model of the library as a singular direction where the collection is controlled by the librarian and lent to the student or researcher. Instead it breaks down those barriers to encourage the exchange of information and ideas across all levels.

Nowhere on campus is better for this kind of interdisciplinary engagement, and nowhere is better suited for the task of preserving collections, albeit digital ones, then the organization trusted with this preservation since Alexandria. This is not a death for the library, or of the collection, but a new beginning.

One thought on "More than a Mausoleum: The Library at the Forefront of Digital Pedagogy"

Patrick
Burns

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I am intrigued by the concept of Scholarship as Conversation. It has the potential to promote creative thinking which can then to creative expression. Think of the new ideas generated by old research that could open the door to a wide variety of new research on ancient topics.