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Patterns of Culture: Re-aligning Library Culture with User Needs

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Abstract

Radical changes in technology and information access have given rise to new academic disciplinary connections, new research and teaching practices, and new modes of communication. With the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Syracuse University Library has undertaken a research project to better understand these changes at the University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. We intend to develop an in-depth understanding of one multi-disciplinary academic culture and then to examine the library's culture and work practices to discover where services and resources are meeting needs and where they are not.

The qualitative methods used in the *Patterns of Culture* project is informed by the ethnographic work conducted at the University of Rochester. The research team, four librarians and a graduate assistant, received training in interview and observational techniques from anthropologist Nancy Foster. Our data gathering, conducted from spring 2007 to spring 2008, involved interviews with faculty, librarians, and students about their work practice, eliciting photographic diaries from students and conducting observations in classrooms and public spaces.

The goal of the *Patterns of Culture* (after Ruth Benedict's landmark work) is threefold: to gain a better understanding of the needs, research, and work practices of the faculty and students and to gain the same type of understanding of library staff; to develop a plan to align library culture, resources, and services more closely with the needs of faculty and students; and to produce a model for data gathering and analysis that can be applied by the library to other academic settings. Our project is unusual in that it applies the same ethnographic methods to three groups, using comparison as a means for deeper understanding.

Introduction

Syracuse University Library received funding in October 2007 by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation to support ethnographic research for better understanding of the cultures, practices, and stories at Syracuse University. We would use our results to inform ways of synchronizing library services more closely with user needs. Although our initial effort was the S.I. Newhouse School of Communications, we planned to use the project as a test case, evaluating the methodology as a model for use in other schools on campus. Finally, we wanted to explore the ways in which a research effort employing ethnographic techniques might serve as a change agent, affecting the ways librarians listen to and work with users.

Background Literature

Emerging from the field of anthropology, the ethnographic method utilizes interviews and participant observation to discover the unspoken "culture," or values, belief, and practices of a group. Ethnography can also be useful in design because it provides insight into the worldview of users—how they work, behave, and what they value. This type of information is exceedingly valuable to marketers and designers, as well as usability engineers. In the 1980s, a group of anthropologists at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center helped to pioneer the use of ethnography in studying how people use software and interact with computers.[1] Jones argues for a larger role of ethnography in design.[2] She points out how ethnographic methods can draw attention to the environmental characteristics, practical applications of abstract ideas, the sociality of design spaces, and models of how people work.

Applying ethnographic methods as a method for assessing library services and facilities is relatively new. Ethnographic methods have been used to assess digital library services,[3] student library behavior,[4]and faculty attitudes toward library instruction.[5] In 2005, Nancy Foster used ethnographic techniques to study how faculty at the University of Rochester used institutional repositories.[6] The University of Rochester has been conducting additional projects that use

ethnographic methods to inform library design, services and student space.[7]

Context

Syracuse University is a private, independent four-year college located in Syracuse, New York. Founded in 1870, Syracuse University serves 18,000 students, including approximately 13,000 undergraduates. Syracuse University Library supports the teaching, learning, and research at the university by providing a wide array of on-site and online resources and associated research support services. The Library's collections include more than 2.9 million volumes, over 21,000 online and print journals, over 400 reference databases, as well as extensive collections of microforms, maps, images, music scores, sound recordings, video, rare books, and manuscripts.

The library staff is comprised of 55 librarians and professional-managerial staff and 125 unionized support staff. The public desks are staffed 104 hours a week; a learning commons provides 24-hour access during the school year. Libraries are equipped with wireless access, laptops for loan, and provide a variety of study spaces including group study rooms, individual study carrels, and designated quiet study areas. The largest SU library is E.S. Bird Library, which houses non-science disciplines, library administrative offices, and the Special Collections Research Center. There is a separate Science and Technology Library and branch libraries for earth science and mathematics. In the process of creating a learning commons area on the first three floors of the building, the library has opened a café on the first floor of the Bird Library and is re-designing its common space and service areas.

With the opening of Newhouse III in October 2007, the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications is now comprised of three buildings linked together by a café and includes computer facilities, editing suites and presentation rooms. The school has 65 faculty plus many adjuncts, enrolling about 1800 undergraduates and 200 graduate students. As a professional school, faculty constitute a mix of "professors of practice" with backgrounds and professional networks in the industry and research faculty who publish in the more scholarly academic literature. All faculty, including administrators, teach. Departments at Newhouse include public relations, broadcast and print journalism, advertising, television, radio & film, and new media. The school supports programs and centers for arts journalism, free speech, legal reporting and television and popular culture in addition to the collaborative work conducted in partnership with campus schools of business, law, visual and performing arts and public citizenship.

Methodology

We conducted pilot interviews with faculty prior to writing the planning grant proposal. From those conversations, we developed these questions:

- Is ethnography a feasible method for learning about our users?
- Can ethnographic data be used as a framework for looking at our own organizational culture?
- Can we compare library and academic "cultures" in a meaningful way?
- Do we share a common understanding with our users as to what the "library" means?

We wanted to use ethnography because it is a non-evaluative approach to assessment. Rather than instructing users in how to use the library, our interviews became opportunities for us to listen and observe how users do their work, in very specific ways, and discover the kinds of barriers they experience as they're doing that work.
Examples of our interview questions about work practice include:

- Tell me about a recent article or piece of information that you read.
- How did you find it?
- What did you do to prepare for your most recent class?
- When you started work in your office today, what was the first thing you did?

These questions were adapted slightly for use with students and with librarians—for instance, students used digital cameras and brought those pictures to the interview as prompts in talking about how they do their work in finding information and carrying out course assignments. The librarian interviews focused less on research and teaching, as librarians at SU don't routinely do extensive academic research for publication or teach credit-bearing classes. We interviewed 38 faculty members at Newhouse from all departments. We interviewed 18 librarians, 5 of which were also manager or department heads. We had 9 students—5 graduate students and 4 undergraduates. We took a Grounded Theory

approach to our analysis of the transcripts. We did not start with a specific expectation of the data or theory, but let topical codes within the transcripts and observation notes emerge from the text itself. These codes were then organized into broader themes.

Cultural Theme	Theme	Example Codes
Tools	Collections/Resources	Named Resources, Personal Collections
	Use of Technology	Technology
	Software	Names Resources, Software
	Communication Technologies	
Daily Life and Behavior	Physical Space	Physical Space
	Time Management	Time
	Learning Technology	Learning Technology
	Finding Information	Finding Information
	Skills	Student Skills
Relationships		Communication
		Dissemination of Information
	Teaching	Teaching, Instruction, Reference
	Social and Work Organization	Collaboration; Collegiality
World View	Perception of the Library and Research	Taxonomy; Library Culture
	Change	Change

As is the nature of all qualitative research, there is a subjective aspect to this approach as well as a limited sample size, particularly for students. To overcome bias, all materials were coded by at least two reviewers. We maintained a glossary that defined codes and conducted brainstorming sessions to analyze results and emerging themes as a research team.

Findings

Tools

> *"We have several books and anybody who wants to do extra credit borrows some of my books—that's why I have so many books here, students actually borrow them."[Faculty]*

All permanent faculty members at Newhouse have offices, and those offices accommodate extensive personal collections of books, media, journal runs, and files. Between faculty and students, the exchange of these personal collections, particularly books and CDs, is a way of creating and maintaining a relationship. Many faculty members rely on their personal collections for their own research—often these are tapes of television programming, collected over the course of many years, or collections of music on CD.

There isn't really a comparable exchange between librarians and patrons, except perhaps when materials are purchased expressly upon the recommendation of a faculty member. Faculty, students, and librarians use different types of technology and for different purposes. Faculty and librarians were more likely to describe technology as useful for professional purposes, such as getting access to information more quickly and effectively. In addition to the portable technologies they use in their personal lives, students utilize sophisticated software programs for their laboratory work in fulfilling course assignments. Librarians are the only group utilizing Wiki software for communication and management purposes. There is a range of interest in new technologies among librarians, from enthusiastic to discouraged, but many possess sophisticated technical skills and are

early adopters of new technologies for productivity and organization. A managing librarian says,

> *"I really love the Wwiki that I showed you because I think for management purposes, and communication purposes, I think it serves a lot of different needs for our staff."[Librarian]*

Additional examples include Firefox add-ons, table of contents services, and readers for Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds. The current awareness and interest that librarians have for these tools may be a fertile area for expertise sharing, particularly with time-challenged faculty.

For communication, faculty use real social networks (not virtual), Blackboard, and e-mail. The University makes available the Blackboard course management system by default for all campus classes; not all faculty members find it useful. Students are using cell phones, Facebook, and Blackboard when required. Facebook is acknowledged to be most useful in communicating with friends and family, and as something fun; e-mail is preferred for use with instructors.

> *"Well the Facebook message is nice I guess if you are going to be under 100 words. The layout is so skinny that a 300-400 word e-mail is so long in length. So if I am just going to say 'Hey, what's up?' or 'Did you see the last episode of The Wire?' then I will do a wall or message. Or if there is something short that I don't want on a wall, I will do a message. But if it is anything that I am asking a serious question I will use e-mail because it is easier to read than a Facebook message." [Student]*

Students have a fine-tuned approach to what technology tool works best for particular communication needs. Librarians also depend on e-mail, with additional reliance on listservs for keeping up in the profession. They are using Web 2.0 technologies, including Wikis, as noted, Facebook, and instant messaging for connecting with colleagues and students.

Daily Life and Behavior

> *"I've just been running at 100 miles an hour since I got here and have never stopped to think what else could I be doing to know some history of things I've been teaching that I haven't read up on. There's just no time. I have no time. I work 7 days a week, 12, 14 hours a day." [Faculty]*

Faculty just can't find enough time in their day to keep up with what they need to do for their teaching and professional obligations; keeping up with trends is a "huge, huge, challenge." In summer, faculty are either doing research, teaching in concentrated summer programs and boot camps, or sharpening their own professional skills as photographers and journalists. Students did not express this kind of frustration about time management, although by college they are expected to have developed workable systems for keeping organized. They are also creative in their use of the limited physical space to which they have access.

> *"I would say I am a neat freak so everything is organized."[Student]*

> *"My room is pretty small, so if I were actually at my desk, I would be blocking my doorway." [Student]*

> *"I just keep my computer in the windowsill; I don't actually have a desk." [Student]*

We also asked students about their favorite place to study and those spaces were a little different than their dormitories and apartments. One student photographed a lounge in a building separate from both the Library and Newhouse:

> *"I really like studying in here because I like the chairs first of all because they are really comfortable, and I also like that fact that people are kind of talking, but they are not talking really loud." [Student]*

> *"To tell you the truth, I don't like studying in Newhouse itself, because I get this feeling like major corporate office, it is a nice looking building, don't get me wrong, but I get this kind of soulless feeling whenever I am in there." [Student]*

Librarians frequently spoke of frustration related to lack of private space for meeting with students or faculty. While close quarters was cited as a positive reinforcement of community and facilitating communication, it is a barrier in affording privacy and working comfortably with patrons.

We were not surprised to find differences between faculty, students, and librarians in finding information and accessing library resources. This is frequently experienced as a barrier to getting work

done, particularly for faculty, less so for students, rarely for librarians.

> *"I do find negotiating the electronic databases confusing at times . . . And I do it from home sometimes, I'll run into permission errors." [Faculty]*

> *"Sometimes it is a hassle to phrase your search right." [Student]*

Roy Tennant's claim that librarians like to search, but everyone else likes to find[8] is true for us:

> *"Almost all of us really like those kind of questions, it is a challenge, it is a scavenger hunt, it is one of those little puzzles that you have to figure out." [Librarian]*

Like frustration with finding information, access barriers related to technology were mentioned frequently. These included unfamiliar log-in prompts for access to databases and electronic journals, requests for payment, or interoperability of media formats—particularly frustrating when time for class preparation is limited. To the extent that faculty can get to free Web sites more easily than library journals and databases, this becomes an access and navigation issue.

> *"A lot of these Web sites are easy to access over again compared to when I search for a journal article, sometimes it is hard to search and find that journal article again." [Faculty]*

> *"We could sit at our library and access it, but if I were trying to access it off campus, you would be met with 'username' and 'password' and you would have to pay hundreds of dollars for access to these things." [Faculty]*

> *"Every time I download a photo it kicks me back out." [Faculty]*

Faculty, particularly those conducting research, are typically more motivated than students to weather difficulties with access. Students, who are using these licensed resources less frequently, did not describe problems with access. Although librarians working primarily from on-campus are faced with these access problems least often, their frustration becomes one of not having the resources to adequately troubleshoot the problems their patrons are experiencing.

> *"I'm not sure what his problem is. It seems that he is failing to go through the proxy and not realizing it. But without a trip to his home I'm not going to be able to determine."[Librarian]*

As with finding information, librarians do not experience barriers for access in the way that faculty and students experience them. Faculty are the most likely to be trying to get into licensed library resources during off hours and from remote locations. Students are less likely to be using these at all, and librarians most frequently may be accessing the resources from campus. If librarians are only demonstrating "canned" searches, they may not be picking up on the difficulties are users are having when working away from the class environment.

Relationships

Within this theme we looked at quotes related to relationships between students, faculty, and librarians within the context of classroom teaching and library instruction. We also used our observations of the classroom in understanding faculty—student relationships. We were impressed by the close relationship the instructors develop with their students, and the back and forth relationship they appear to have. Students contribute to class content in formal presentations as well as informal sharing, from interesting Web sites to technical expertise.

> *"I try to do as much research into their world as they'll allow me to do. Sometimes they're happy to teach me about things I've never heard of." [Faculty]*

> *"I think of my job as not only teaching them what I need to teach them but also creating situations where they learn from one another." [Faculty]*

Classes we observed were more interactive than lecture, and faculty go to a lot of trouble to bring in media clips and visuals to maintain interest. That's something the librarians don't do as often. Librarians we talked with about instruction were describing instruction sessions which are often one shot sessions.

> *"I am sort of one of those people that feels that, I don't sort of trust myself to remember everything I need to talk about, so I basically write out a script for the whole class."[Librarian]*

"Librarians are always trying to make their instruction more meaningful and a little more long-lasting."[Librarian]

These differences are not necessarily pedagogical but due to the fact that librarians have a much shorter time period in which to interact with students. Because faculty and students spend the semester together and have a built-in status relationship (i.e., the instructor is grading the student), their relationship with the students is different than that of the librarians.

Whereas Newhouse faculty are continually updating their teaching materials based on the constant change in their field, librarians may use the same instructional materials from semester to semester. Where faculty encourage dialogue and collaboration in the classroom, library instruction sessions are more uni-directional in nature. When faculty at Newhouse sometimes teach in a free-form manner and let students drive the direction of the class, librarians feel constrained by time limitations as well as, perhaps, by the expectations of the faculty.

Worldview: Perceptions of the Library

"Well you have to understand that we're drones at Newhouse so that everything we read, see, touch, feel is part of our work. We're not academics, so we're not looking for journal articles." [Faculty]

"So for that course, are they doing in-depth library research? No. They're reading screenplays I make available to them." [Faculty]

"But I essentially, every story I do I start from scratch. I'm reporting, I get court records, and I talk to people. So I do next to no library research, or what I think of in my ignorance as library research. I just do reporting." [Faculty]

Newhouse faculty and students differentiate between research and 'library' research. Regular research may be conducted online, using search tools such as Google. It may consist of conducting interviews or surveys. Library research usually means going to the physical library building or utilizing scholarly journal articles and databases. For the majority, the library is equated with books—old ones. Several faculty brought up reasons for why they did not use the library, which almost always centered around the fact that the books at the library were too out-of-date for their needs.

Book resources are good for points of view, different takes on what's happening. But what I'm doing sometimes requires up-to-date information and books are already old. [Faculty]

This does not negate the fact that many Newhouse faculty are avid supporters of the library, its rich resources, and the expert services provided by staff.

I think the library does an absolutely wonderful job and I've been just thrilled with everybody I've met over there. I've had great results. I will admit to my own ignorance about some or much of what you guys might have available. [Faculty]

Recommendations

Communications

Faculty use Blackboard to communicate with students as a class. Librarians have no comparable way of communicating directly to an entire class in this proactive way. Our communication with students is dependent on students coming to us for help or their instructors, the faculty, pushing the library on our behalf. This is a key area for development. For a start, librarians should utilize the communication tools that are already being used between faculty and their students, insuring that links to the library and subject librarians from Blackboard courses are standard. For those many courses that have no Blackboard presence, subject pages or links from faculty pages to the library with appropriate, co-selected resources, should be available for each department.

Librarians have developed Facebook pages, but that is not how faculty communicate with students. In fact, some faculty discourage their students from requesting friend status. On the other hand, many of the technology tools that we do learn about through our own profession, like journal table of contents services and feed readers, may be of real use to faculty and students.

Space

Students don't have a wide choice about their dormitory or off-campus space while they are at the University. But they do make decisions as to where to study and access computers. They desire comfortable and quiet, but not too quiet, space for study. At computer labs, they need access at the

times of day that accommodate busy schedules as well as knowledgeable staff that can assist them with technical questions. For librarians, space must accommodate their needs to meet privately for interactions with students. Librarians may also consider that they can be as effective *away* from their library desks, since that is not where most Newhouse users are working.

Finding and Accessing Information

Faculty at Newhouse want their students to use critical thinking skills in evaluating their sources. However, in our research we found that students may not use the library to develop those skills unless it is expressly expected by their instructors. Students prefer to use online tools such as Google and YouTube for their class assignments. When these tools are appropriate to the assignment, instruction in the efficient and best use of these tools would be welcome expert knowledge. Librarians could be those experts, helping students to search Google effectively, or how to embed short YouTube videos into multimedia presentations. Improvements to the navigation within our own Library's Web site, a more user-friendly catalog with intuitive interface, and context-sensitive help—these are additional areas for resolving barriers to both finding information and access.

Faculty, especially, need more information about the resources available to them; we've considered an information fair: a stop in event at Newhouse that would be devoted to library databases and journals in the communications field, and bringing vendors in as well. There is opportunity we think as well for more subject-oriented pages that connect up with Blackboard courses but also available from outside the course management system. A more collaborative approach to subject Web pages and customized portals may also improve awareness.

Classroom Relationships

Many of the characteristics of students that we learned could be applied to improving instruction sessions. Both faculty and librarians approach a classroom situation with a plan and sometimes, even a "script." There is an overarching requirement to deliver specific content areas. But faculty seem willing and eager to learn from their students, and students gain confidence from teaching faculty new things. We would like to consider more interactive, less scripted instruction sessions. Students learn from their peers. Peer instruction could be integrated into instruction sessions. Students often experience failure in their information-seeking and get frustrated. It might be enlightening for them to see librarians not only modeling searches but strategies to use when those searches fail. Finally, in our data gathering, the observation of classroom instruction was most useful. It provided us an opportunity to witness firsthand the dynamics within the classroom between an instructor and the student. In observing how assignments are described, librarians can see the requirements asked of student and expectations. Observing in the classroom is a way of demonstrating real interest in what is going on. It makes the librarian a visible face for students, and puts that librarian in a space outside the library building.

Re-framing What "Library" Means

As librarians, we see the library in its rich array of collections and services. We assume that our values for are those of all our users. Our users may see us differently. In their outreach with faculty and instruction with students, librarians should be listening carefully to these users. Instruction is a place for student engagement, as well as a place to dissuade them of outdated ideas about the library and its resources—at least as more than a repository for old books. Librarians and faculty would both benefit from an open dialogue regarding the whole constellation of research resources and instruction services available through the library and its staff. These may include skills not currently considered traditional library instruction, like critical thinking about information sources, plagiarism, effectively searching the Web, and technologies for staying current and organizing Web resources. A collaborative project, in which students create a public relations campaign for the library, marketing it to fellow students, this is would provide a win-win opportunity.

Conclusion

The ethnographic method we have used has provided us with some rich data that illuminates the needs of users in a different light. Our intended next step is to use the methods of ethnographic interview and observation beyond the Newhouse School. We want to investigate how other academic cultures, more traditionally tied to the academic library values and collections, compare to the Newhouse culture. The question of what library "means," particularly across the disciplines and in

the face of changing information seeking behaviors, is an intriguing one. We would also like to conduct more in-depth interviews with librarians, learning more about this organizational culture and how it is changing. Analyzing this data has been a time consuming process, but one that provides new insights into our own work and suggests many directions for change. Beyond the information gathering, the process of listening and observing as a group has led to some very productive brainstorming about these "disconnects" and ways we, as librarians, can begin to address them. And those conversations are a good start in fostering organizational re-invigoration.

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