

From MySpace to OurSpace: Fostering Community through Patron-Centered Spaces

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Introduction: Students, Libraries, and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*

A Naval Commander. A surgeon. A trial lawyer. A World War II bomber pilot. He was fearless, brave, and confident. He was determined, respected, and heroic. He was also, well, utterly delusional. But there is something in Walter Mitty's experience that is captivating – and profoundly relevant to my particular experience as a librarian, and, I dare say, to yours as well.

You remember James Thurber's short story of Walter Mitty and his wife. They were an older couple, how old we do not know, on their weekly drive into the city. He copes with the jejune trip and his overly dotting wife by seemingly being more at home, more comfortable, in fantastic (mis)conceptions of himself in various heroic roles. His wife, however, with her complete and utter lack of awareness of his dreams, is quick to reign him in, to orient his attention away from delusions of grandeur and back to the business at hand: puppy biscuits and overshoes.

James Thurber was certainly not thinking of libraries and archives when he penned this story. I, however, cannot keep from doing so. Consider for a moment whether we, as librarians and archivists, share somewhat in Walter's fantasies. Sure, we may be correct in our estimation of how underestimated we really are, and perhaps it would do the world some good to realize that without us civilization would indeed crumble in six days, but there is also perhaps, just perhaps, a bit of fantastic coping that accompanies the realities of our professional contexts. Do we not see ourselves as heroic servants, valiant conservators of valuable information otherwise lost, singularly devoted to steering a course through the frenetic and combative landscape like Walter the Naval Commander?

But who is our wife? Now there is a fun question to consider. Who plays the role of bringing us back to less lofty realities? To whom are we inextricably tied, but who

completely and utterly lacks any understanding of our needfully fantastic roles? The administrations and faculties of our institutions? The students? The public? I don't know that I have the answer, but, truth be told, they are having their own identity crises as well.

Yes, public libraries are constantly plagued with an identity crisis.¹ Yes, academic libraries are increasingly absorbing new responsibilities. My own library has recently absorbed the Seminary's archaeological museum, Lottie Moon Collection, and computer lab. And, yes, institutional archives increasingly face changing realities in many different contexts.

Students, in turn, experience their communities through increasingly isolated ways. Classes foster participation through Blackboard, eCampus, and other message boards, albeit usually in addition to face-to-face meetings. Social networking is increasingly individualistic. Community is being studied through participation in virtual worlds like SecondLife.

Augustinian Concepts of Community

What hath all this to do with Jerusalem? It all boils down to the essence of community. What is it? How do we create it? Do we really want it? Let us be warned, though, that the answer to these questions is essentially one of morality, for the nature of community is essentially moral. St. Augustine argued that a multitude does not become a people without it.

...a people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love, then, in order to discover the character of any people, we have only to observe what they love. Yet whatever it loves, if only it is an assemblage of reasonable beings and not of beasts, and is bound together by an agreement as to the objects of love, it is reasonably called a people.²

According to Augustine, then, the formation of community requires moral reflection in the identification of common, shared, objects of affection which are then celebrated together rather than in private. Oliver O'Donovan seizes this Augustinian idea of community and argues that the essence of community is therefore communication.³ Those who are partners in communication begin to form a community. They become a "we" in relation to the object, whatever it may be, that is common to their affections. We must, then, strive for these basic things if community is to be fostered and generated in our spaces:

1. Gathering. In whatever means most fitting to our particular institutions and populations, opportunities for gathering must be present in our spaces if we hope

¹See William F. Birdsall, "Community, Individualism, and the American Public Library," *Library Journal* (November 1, 1985): 21-24.

²Augustine, *The City of God* 19:24.

³Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

to foster community. This includes physical and virtual spaces. Students will seek those places on campus, or if necessary, in Barnes and Noble or Starbucks, where they can gather for this purpose. Our facilities contain information beyond measure, but our collections are crying out for gathered discussion.

2. Identification of a common object of love. From churches, to seminaries, to colleges, this basic principle remains true. Why do students desire to attend your institution? Is this reason the same as the institutional goals?
3. Opportunities for spontaneous celebration of those objects. Spontaneity means at least some measure of powerlessness by the powers-that-be. That is surely a scary prospect.

Without attempting to foster community by focusing on at least these three things, we are probably only developing a Walter Mitty sort of community, or perhaps our efforts are Walter Mitty delusions.

Community and Physical Spaces

The results of a study of the most preferred library spaces on the campus of Princeton University were recently shared at an annual conference of the Acoustical Society of America, and revealed that though students expressed a desire for “quiet” libraries which were “free of distractions,” they actually used the libraries with higher ambient noise levels.⁴ Sometimes patron-centered spaces are not necessarily the quietest spaces – even if they think they prefer them. Acoustic tests performed on William College’s Schow Science Library revealed that their forty-foot-tall ceilings with brick, glass, and plasterboard walls made for an acoustic atmosphere that was extremely quiet but produced a reverberative environment similar to a concert hall or a church. They remedied the situation and gave students a more studious atmosphere by installing eight “emitters” (loudspeakers) which increased the background noise until the ambient noise levels were high enough that the sounds of copiers, staplers, computers, and barcode scanners were no longer so startling.

Library By Design’s Spring, 2009, issue includes “Twelve Keys to Library Design” which include: (1) Create a sense of place by including places for group study and collaboration as well as “individual, quiet, contemplative spaces...”; (4) Infuse library spaces with technology; (8) Make your library a home to new services by consolidating services previously scattered across campus. It would seem that these recommendations are internationally applicable since they are completely compatible with the conclusions reached in 2006 by Loughborough University in Leicestershire, England.⁵ They discovered that their users’ reasons for using their library included, not surprisingly, simultaneous access to paper and electronic information, though only 2.5 percent

⁴Benjamin Markham, “The Right Kind of Quiet,” *Library Journal* (September 16, 2008): 32.

⁵Graham Walton, “Learner’s Demands and Expectations for Space in a University Library: Outcomes from a Survey at Loughborough University,” *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 12/2 (2006): 133-149. Walton rightly points out that many are predicting that “the next great library debate may be over library space” (Engel and Antell, 2004), and that reviews of academic library space have been conducted at both regional and national levels (Council on Library and Information Resources 2005).

of respondents identified the journal collection as an important reason for their use of the library. Users' indicated reasons for their use of the library also had significant reference to the library space as "a useful place to meet," which as we have seen, is quite significant for the library's role in the fostering of community. Some respondents indicated that the library's provision of carrels for independent study were important factors, while others cited the library as "an ideal area for group work where [students] can meet to complete projects with computers nearby for email, etc." Yet another referred to the library as a good place to study because it has a "working ethos about it." These very things were cited by other students in their reasons for *not* using the library. Almost five percent of respondents indicated that the library was "more of a social place rather than a library – too much noise."

Contradictory comments were also received concerning the library's food and drink policies. Only two respondents wanted greater restrictions of eating and drinking in the library. One of whom wrote, "You appear to view the library more as a McDonald's than a place of study!" Many more, however, wanted less restrictions on food and drinks in the library (surprise, surprise).

Given that more than half of the users of the library were in the building for more than two hours during their last visit, it would seem that if the library intends to contribute to and foster community by enabling students who so desire the opportunity to celebrate together their common objects, it (we) would do well to consider the implications. Physical environment, noise levels, and accessories for both sides of each contradictory perspective are consistently identified by library patrons as the most important factors in their choice to use (or not use) the library. Our libraries should therefore consider the following recommendations:

1. Fostering community through physical space means a willingness to make spaces available which have conflicting purposes – quiet vs. noisy, cell phone permissions, refreshments, etc... Recognize that though the physical environment is the single most important factor cited by students, students do are not of a singular mind about the preferred nature of that environment.
2. Fostering community through physical space means a willingness to allow physical and virtual spaces to overlap. Provide computer access in each type of space, whether designated as quiet, noisy, group, or individual. Consider laptop loans.
3. Fostering community through physical space means a willingness to leave them alone, or not. Research indicates that only thirty to forty percent of users at academic libraries desire for a reference librarian or other library/IT staff member to circulate periodically through the Learning Commons to proactively see if they need assistance, and even fewer (twenty to twenty-five percent) want one to circulate elsewhere in the library.⁶ Still, if these percentages are correct and transferable then twenty to forty percent of academic library users want us to intervene!

⁶Anne Cooper Moore and Kimberly A. Wells, "Connecting 24/5 to Millennials: Providing Academic Support Services from a Learning Commons," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 35/1 (January 2009): 75-85.

Community and Virtual Spaces

Today's students, especially the younger ones, are often referred to as "digital natives." For those of us who are "digital immigrants," we often fall into the conviction that technology has changed *absolutely everything*. Technology, though, cannot change human nature. Certainly, it has clouded our understanding of identity and of community, but students themselves have not changed in their essence. For example, college students are still typically more interested in, well, *anything*, than in their studies, but it is certainly true that technology has changed how students interact and relate.

Take, for example, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. Social networking sites offer students a means of interaction, of self-promotion, through "profiles" where they express their identities. The information they post about themselves as well as the ways in which they adorn their profile pages are merely technology-enabled attempts at hanging virtual posters on their dormitory walls. "Friends" are those to whom they desire to portray their image and adorned identity. The generational divide, though this description as generational is not really all that accurate, is quite evident at this point. For us digital immigrants, the prospect of answering the dreaded question, "Are you my friend, Yes or No?," causes more than a fair bit of anxiety. This anxiety is present for digital natives as well, since the social dramas we remember from "back when" are still present but now played out online – with a transcript for all to see – and in a forum where anyone can comment about it.

If you utilize a social networking service, it is likely either Facebook or Twitter. Maybe Yammer. But probably not MySpace. Facebook and MySpace are like two neighboring high schools whose districts are separated by the railroad tracks. They do not necessarily compete for the same users. The educated, middle- to upper-class tend to use Facebook. Those of lower socio-economic demographics trend toward MySpace. If we as librarians and archivists, as well as our libraries and archives, are moving toward the use of a social networking service in the marketing and provision of our services, are we taking into account these differences? What of those students who come to your university or seminary having only ever known MySpace? Are there differences in skills, in knowledge, in background that need to be taken into account?⁷

Here we are tempted to make some rather stray, inaccurate, conclusions about social networking. Did you know the median age of Twitterers is thirty-one? Many forms of social media are more often used by us than by our student populations. Given how the twittersphere has so many of us all-atwitter, I wonder how effective it will be with students in just a matter of a couple of years. For example, a recent article in *RUSQ* investigated student preferences in delivery methods for library instruction at academic libraries and concluded that even with the enthusiasm of many LIS practitioners for podcasting, there is a significant lack of interest on the part of students to receive library instruction in audio-only formats.⁸ Even so, a willingness to adopt and adapt virtual spaces for dissemination of our information occasionally pays off – just ask

⁷The undisputed authoritative source on this entire discussion is the excellent doctoral research conducted by danah michele boyd [sic] at Berkeley's iSchool, *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*, 2008.

⁸Michael J. Robertson and James G. Jones, "Exploring Academic Library Users' Preferences of Delivery Methods for Library Instruction," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 48/3 (2009): 25-269.

Harvard University Press about McKenzie Wark and *Gamer Theory*. *Gamer Theory* was a book about why people enjoy playing video games which Harvard University Press published as a conventional hardcover in 2007. Wark also posted the book online using CommentPress and allowed reader comments on each and every paragraph. The result was something of a phenomenal interaction between readers about the content of the book, which resulted in an even larger body of text.⁹ My point is that we should not assume that students will adopt all forms of online networking and use what we consider to be popular technologies, and that our communication habits with students and our provision of services should therefore be marked by both an appropriate hesitancy and willingness.

Research shows a surprising trend. The use of technology to aggregate and disseminate information is largely limited to older student populations in the twenty- to thirty-something range. Adolescent students are, as a trend, just not as familiar with tools like del.icio.us or diigo or Bloglines or Google Reader. They prefer to communicate through simple texting – and they do so alot. In the fourth quarter of 2008, American teenagers sent and received an average of 2,272 text messages per month.¹⁰ We ought not to develop the habit of adopting the latest in technologies that enable social networking under false assumptions about student-use and then be naively surprised that our students are not using them.

All this is to say that to the extent to which we are willing to provide library services in a way that students find helpful toward an enablement of their desire to celebrate together their common objects of love, we should take the following into account:

1. Fostering community through virtual space means a willingness to be content with some level of invisibility, and perhaps even anonymity, for our users. Most of us are probably uncomfortable in environments where assessment is not possible, and rightly so. My choice of words in this article is tailored to my expectation that you are likely a librarian or archivist at a Baptist institution. Fostering community in virtual spaces, though, will not likely be successful unless we are willing for our content to be read by anonymous lurkers as well as by users who happen upon our content asynchronously. We must present ourselves, our content, and our services without fully understanding our audience if we hope to provide the opportunity for them to freely and spontaneously interact in their celebration of their common objects, and therefore contribute toward the building of a genuine community. It sounds counter-intuitive, and it is.
2. Fostering community through virtual space means a willingness for decreased contextualization. We all agree that we choose our words and actions, to some extent, based on the context. If there is some measure of invisibility and asynchronicity in our virtual spaces, there must needs be some decreased ability to contextualize the content. Are we willing for this to happen?
3. Finally, fostering community through virtual space means an institutional willingness to surrender some control of space and information, and to trust their

⁹See Clive Thompson, "The Future of Reading," *Wired Magazine* (June 2009): 50.

¹⁰Katie Hafner, "Texting May Be Taking a Toll," *The New York Times*, May 25 2009.

communities with it. For libraries, this means that as we contemplate user-generated content in our OPACs (tagging, reviews, maybe even metadata) we must realize that we cannot control it completely and still give a sense of ownership to our users. If we want our virtual spaces to contribute to the development of community, we cannot dictate to our users how they may and may not participate in *their* community.

Conclusion

Tis bad enough in man or woman
To steal a goose from off a common;
But surely he's without excuse
Who steals the common from the goose.

– Anon., “On Inclosures”