

BRIDGING THE GAP: BOOMER LIBRARIANS LURE MILLENNIAL STUDENTS TO THE LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

Old dogs can learn new tricks and industrious baby boomer librarians can bridge the generation gap with the just-in-time millennial students who form the new wave crashing upon the ancient rock of the library. And millennial students are finding the library is the place to be, as did their parents before them. The library of the Curtin University of Technology has been busy bridging the gap by adapting traditional services to new technology and transforming the physical place of the library into a comfortable blend of the real and the virtual. The library is the place to be courtesy of an aging but energetic profession who are not yet ready to make way.

1 INTRODUCTION

It could be argued that the library profession is aging (Curran 2003) and that succession planning is becoming a topic of increasing urgency. This is not surprising as the library profession reflects the same demographic as the rest of the population and the population hump of the baby boomers is moving through the profession. This is not to say that there are not other generations present in the profession, indeed that would be a disservice to the up and coming professionals, or that there is any problem in having an aged profession, but in the last five years the presence of baby boomers has been significant for their number and the seniority of their positions.

The boomer generation can be taken as applying to those born between 1946 and 1961 (Gordon 2006). Generational characterisations are only a broad brush with a general consensus in the literature. Kyles (2005) describes the boomer generation as competitive, political and hardworking. Others note the importance placed on progression at work, the title of their position and the size of their office. There can be no doubt that the boomers take their work seriously. Mackay (1997) notes that society was booming in general at the time the boomers were growing up, economically and socially. However they had this economic prosperity and new openness of society with the cold war as a backdrop. He argues that the boomer generation didn't expect to live forever and retained through out a sense of living now, not for the future. They are sometimes characterised as the 'me' generation. As a generational characteristic one quality that is mentioned in subsequent generations but not usually associated with the boomers is techno-literacy. However lack of early exposure hasn't stopped boomer librarians from taking the technological leaps as they appear, perhaps not with the agility and ease of the younger set but effectively enough.

On the other side of the desk it comes as no surprise that the bulk of undergraduate students are from the millennial generation. This generation is generally taken as applying to those born between 1979 and 2000 (Gordon 2006) and are well represented in the current undergraduate student population of universities. Kyles (2005) describes this generation as techno-literate, purposed and multi-tasking. Eisner (2005) notes that this generation are continuously wired plugged-in and connected. She describes them as living in a globalised world with 24/7 digital connectivity. Notably she also characterises them as expecting

intellectual challenge with high educational expectations and being socially well connected. Gardner and Eng (2005) describe the millennial student as: having great expectations; expecting customisation; being technology veterans and utilizing new communication modes. The millennial generation has grown up in an era where a number of key environmental variables are very different to the generation that grew up in the sixties. They have been reared by generation X parents who gave them more attention (children of the boomer generation are sometimes described as the first latch-key generation), and were exposed to communication technology from an early age and whose educational experiences placed greater emphasis on working as part of a group. They are sometimes described as the 'us' generation, being used to continuous communication with their peers.

Even taking the generational characterisations with a large grain of salt, there is little doubt that the life experience of the 20 year old student at university today is vastly different to that of the 20 year old student at university in the 1970's. The way in which the boomer generation experienced education is very different from the experience of the current generation of new undergraduates. There is a clear generational gap in life experience and in expectations. Fortunately the students of the seventies have not been suddenly revived from a frozen sleep, but have also lived through the last thirty years. Indeed they have experienced the rapidly evolving information technology and been part of the changing society. Their life experience is different to that of the new student but also much broader.

Bridging the generation gap is a task that by needs must fall to the older generation, and so it has been.

2 DISCUSSION

How have the librarians at Curtin approached this generational divide? This is not to say that the scenario to be painted is the result of a collective and conscious decision making process that recognised that the new generation of student would require some radical change or that a blueprint was available. The study of generational change is most effective with hindsight and distance and not at all clear when up close and personal. However with hindsight there is a consistent theme to the change and bridging the generational divide provides a useful framework to describe the outcomes. As with any response to change a mixture of overall strategy and tactical responsiveness can be effective. Bridging the gap has not been solely driven by library staff nor client led demand. In reality the changes have been the result of client push and staff pull. The penny drops in unexpected moments and good ideas can seem unlikely at the time and brilliant in retrospect. It is true that there is a desire by library staff to better meet the needs of the current crop of library users and that feedback mechanisms are in place, but sometimes the client doesn't know what they need. Sometimes the library staff know what the client needs, but don't know how to deliver it. The result is a cycle of incremental change. This is an approach that resonates with the hardworking boomers who have experienced rapid change over their lives and who expect change to be successful. After all, this is the generation who saw man walk on the moon. The millennial generation have only seen footage.

We come now to the impact of information technology, and it is interesting to note that information rather than computing has become the best adjective for the technology, even though computing is at the heart of the new technology. The focus is no longer on the chip or the cable but on the information which is passed and processed. With the rapid changes in information technology the student no longer needs to enter the physical temple of the library to find all of their information. Indeed for academic staff they may rarely enter the library, a place they once haunted with regularity. For the new undergraduate the daily bread that would force their attendance at the temple of knowledge – text books, lecture notes, closed

reserve books and articles, access to photocopiers and quiet cubicles to digest them – have all changed. Core resources are largely available online anywhere and anytime. That librarians were the prime architects of the change, providing reserve with an ‘e’ and continuous world wide access in collaboration with their teaching colleagues (Moynihan, Geoghegan and Green 2005), doesn’t diminish the collateral damage. It has been of concern that the library was in danger of losing its place at the heart of campus. Did the library have a future? There have been no shortage of doomsayers, predicting that the internet was the death knell of the library. However this has not proved to be true. At the Curtin library student attendance is still very strong. What has enticed students into the library in the new millennium?

Let us consider the interaction between the services of the library and its physical space. Futuristic visions of students sitting on the beach with their laptops may not be completely wrong but overlook the compelling need students have for a shared, comfortable and task appropriate space. The library began providing computing facilities for students as soon as computers became a commodity item. The library profession have always been early adopters of new technologies. By the start of the current millennium provision of computer workstations had become an integral part of providing a library service. How could services be increasing delivered online if students didn’t have access to the online world? In the early years the computer workstations were locked down and signed-up with edicts prohibiting email and other contact with the real world. ‘Library Databases ONLY – no access to email’ was a common message. However it soon became clear that students did not want to segregate their activities so cleanly. Indeed the ability to multi-task and use new communication methods is a strong characteristic of the millennial student. Students didn’t wish to leave their social and work lives behind when they entered the academy. Even boomer librarians could recognise a losing fight and eventually provided workstations that allowed a student to create a microcosm in which study was embedded in their other activities. Indeed, while email was once considered an inappropriate activity in an academic library, it is now a required part of learning. The millennial students have appropriated the technologies into their lives and see no need to separate their work from their play. For the millennial student it is all work and all play. So it is apparent that one of the drivers for continued physical attendance at the library in the new millennium is ready access to computer workstations.

However the demand for workstations is insatiable and the library was consistently taken to task in client surveys for their lack of computing. So the number of workstations grew. This was still not enough and the convergence of wireless networking with the growing affordability of laptop computers allowed students to work anywhere in the library and be fully connected. Creating spaces where laptops could be plugged into power and the physical network further enhanced the usability of the library space. Students, even of the millennial generation, still conduct a substantial portion of their study via the printed page. A networked printing solution allows printing from any wired or wireless computer in the library to any of a multitude of printers. The volume of printing continues to grow while the volume of photocopying continues to decline at a proportional rate. This would suggest that the means has changed but the fundamental ‘print and read’ behaviour has not changed.

Observation of the millennial student confirms that their focus on study is substantial, not surprising given the financial commitment involved in the new millennium, but they do this in a noisy, messy and multi-tasked environment. They interweave their study with peer interactions in small groups and via their many communication devices. This can be somewhat bewildering to an older generation, but business as usual for the millennial student. Observation also notes that when the noisy flock of students have departed for the day they leave behind a substantial scattering of books and other resources, evidence that they have taken advantage of the proximity of physical resources. In the parlance of the library

profession large parts of the library have come to be perceived as part of an information commons (Beagle 1999) where the students' study activity is enhanced by the presence of trained staff and by access to resources. But that is not all that draws them to the library.

Old library buildings have a sense of gravitas and tradition while new, award winning library buildings have a sense of light and space, but the original library building at Curtin suffers from being built in a period where pre-formed concrete was the flavour of the day and windows were seen as a distraction. A partial extension in the 1990s created more space and light, however further makeovers were required, difficult in a time of budget tightening, but nonetheless required. An opportunity for additional space on the entrance level was boldly seized and a more vibrant and relaxed space was created. The appropriately named 'lounge @ your library' combines comfortable, open seating with computing, vending machines and world news. It proves very popular with the millennial students, who take the opportunity, somewhat surprisingly to the boomer librarians, to combine the comfortable social space with a great deal of educational activity. The 'lounge' also creates the right impression for a new generation of students, that the library is a place for them and that it is at the heart of their life on campus.

Elsewhere in the library opportunities were being taken to provide more space for group study. Converting old office space and 'study cubicles' into group study rooms proved very popular with students. The whiteboards are frequently covered in business plans, worked engineering calculations or schematics. Laptops, using the wireless network, capture the combined thoughts of teams and presentations are rehearsed. With each subsequent year opportunities are taken to invigorate spaces within the library along a similar vein; more vibrant, functional and flexible.

In the new networked and comfortable library the student, while having the same need for library staff assistance as previous generations, is suddenly and perversely, less mobile! They are tied to their computer workstation or group study room or windowed carrel or laptop. In a large multi storied library they don't wish to wander the floors looking for the reference desk and relinquish their foothold of space in a busy library. However the student still requires assistance. The solution to the problem lies in adapting a traditional face to face service to the new technologies to meet this need and to do so in a way that meshes with the preferred style of the millennial student.

The most classic example of traditional face to face library service, which students value and staff enjoy providing, is the reference service. This is where a dialogue occurs between enquiring client and knowledgeable librarian. The classic reference interview is a dance between two willing partners who circle the problem with a series of questions and responses until the real problem is revealed and a solution can be provided. This reference interview in a past age would take place with the librarian seated at a wide, wood grained desk, and the student seated in the appellants' position. The tone would be hushed but the exchange would be vigorous and satisfaction be gained by both parties. The client would be subtly enriched with a deeper understanding of the working of the information world while gaining the prize they sought and the librarian would bask in the position of benefactor and mediator and mentor. The emergence of the information deluge and the conversion of books to bytes has not diminished the need for the reference interview. Information still needs to be winkled out of its kernel, contextualised and cited. Indeed the volume and breadth of information available obscures rather than reveals.

The library started its response to this dilemma with a fully featured commercial service that would 'push' web pages to the student while conducting a 'chat'. However early attempts failed to have the desired impact, largely because of the slowness of the technology. Millennial students have little patience for slow chat. While the chat interface may have been

new to the boomer librarians, the millennial student is a technology veteran and their expectations are high and their attention is sharp but brief. Further experimentation and development provided a simpler, faster and cleaner chat interface. This proved an immediate hit with students and they flocked to the new service in satisfying numbers. They received the service in a medium they understood and which meshed with their multi-tasking predilections and their need to preserve their space.

But the library wasn't finished. What if the student in the library still required a physical presence? What if they needed someone to look over their shoulder or explain in more depth than allowed for in a chat session? No problem. Rovers would patrol the floors and be contacted by walkie talkie and directed to the student, or the librarian could leave their sanctuary and attend in person. The value for the student physically located within the library was thus enhanced.

What about simple enquires? "Where are the printers?" No problem. These could be handled in the same manner. The student isn't to know if it is an 'enquiry' or a reference question. As with traditional face to face services all needs could be addressed.

What about the student who isn't using a computer? What about the much loved simple message service? Why couldn't a student send their enquiry using their thumbs? No problem. An SMS enquiry service was required. But how would the boomer staff handle responding to SMS. Their arthritic fingers were more used to a normal keyboard than the pad of a mobile phone. No problem. An email – to – SMS service was deployed and the librarians wouldn't need to do more than read and respond to email. This service proved popular for a niche market and gained a steady usage. The SMS enquiry service dovetailed neatly into the multi-faceted communication interface of the millennial student (Giles and grey-Smith 2005).

Indeed the days when information could be delivered to a predictable desktop target were fleeting and are now history. When information is presented online no assumptions can be made that students will be viewing the information from homogenous desktop browsers. Computer workstations, laptops, mobile phones, PDAs and other multi-function hand held devices are now part of the standard arsenal of the millennial student. The millennial student will use their weapon of choice and will move seamlessly between devices, perhaps using more than one simultaneously. The library knows that this is a battle that will rage for some time and that the delivery of information requires constant attention. This is a difficult task and not one that can claim complete success. However the use of the latest web technologies have closed the gap. Core library services can now be accessed by a multitude of devices (Bergman 2006).

And information is no longer a one way street. The millennial student expects to be part of the information cycle. The delivery of library information via a Blog not only allows for syndication but also for comments and discussion (Wiebrands 2006).

What about the traditional library service of information literacy? The millennial student holds down a job and juggles a powerful social commitment with their heavy student work load. They need to be able to acquire the information literacy skills that the librarian knows they need, without having to front up at a certain place or a certain time. As it turns out the millennial student is a great consumer of media, bring digitally connected and multi-tasking (Eisner 2005). Podcasting information literacy seems a logical idea to the boomer librarians (Atkinson et al. 2006). Scripts were written, technology acquired and performances captured as pod casts. These were published to the web and downloaded at a very satisfactory rate. Time will tell as to their efficacy, but the boomer librarians again managed to adapt traditional services to the new technology and the new generation.

The profusion of online service creates its own problem. With each new service being offered the student has to discover the service and then locate it when required. The multi-tasking millennial student is not fazed by the deluge of information but doesn't want to waste time wading through multi-layered Byzantine web pages. This is the generation whose benchmark for service is set by Google. Enter the student portal. The portal has the ability to allow personalised delivery of information and customisation by the student. The first saves the time of the student and the second allows the millennial student the ability to tailor their environment as they desire. As elucidated previously by the author (Green 2005) a fully featured student portal offers a time saving and functional gateway for high use and high value services to be delivered in an integrated medium. The student is only one click away from checking their email, renewing their library books or conducting a literature search or online chat.

Curiously, as the demand for computer workstations, wireless networking, group spaces and social spaces was being met the demand for silent work space re-immersed as an issue. The millennial student also finds a need for silent, private undisturbed working time. The most traditional purpose of the library - that of a quiet haven for considered thinking and study - is still a drawcard. The reshaping of the physical library appears set to continue, and students will be leading and led by the boomer librarians.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Innovative changes implemented by the library of the Curtin University of Technology illustrate that the aging library profession is responsive to the preferences of the millennial student and demonstrate the importance of the relationship between students, technology and the physical space of the library. While these series of changes haven't been part of a master plan aimed specifically at satisfying the particular needs of the new generation of students, the outcome has had that effect. This is not surprising given that an innovative library will use multiple sources of inspiration and that the societal and technological changes which have formed the millennial student have also exerted an influence on the library staff. No generation is an island.

The changes include the ground breaking SMS enquiry service, where students can ask anything via SMS and receive cogent replies in real time, and which is now in its third year. The online reference service has evolved into a heavily used versatile real time chat facility that makes library staff accessible from all parts of a large library building, breaking the barrier of a physical service point, and where students can summon in-person help when required. Web delivered resources have been reviewed and tailored to suit hand held devices. The student portal provides a seamless entry point into library services and a single click to interactive review of loans, recall and fines. Pod casts provide library information and information literacy in bite sized grabs for the time shifting student. The library lounge offers a modern, comfortable physical space where food, drink, computing and study can be combined. Ubiquitous wireless networking allows versatile use of personal devices throughout the building. Student access to the wired network offers high speed internet access and power points for student laptops. Library Blogs deliver syndicated information while providing mechanisms for closing the feedback loop. And while students could do most of this from the comfort of their own broad banded bedrooms they also choose, in large numbers, to immerse themselves in the university experience in the context of a modern library. The busy millennial students can flock with their class mates in re-furbished group study rooms, lounge on plush couches watching World News and eating hot chips, have remote discourse with librarians and do so with their device of choice – large or small, wired or wireless. They can check their loans with a single click while checking their email and

entering their tutorial chat-room, or glide seamlessly from study plan to full text library resource.

By adapting traditional services to new technologies, reshaping the physical space and by adopting new technologies the aging library profession has revitalised the library on campus and provided a means for students to engage with university life in a way that will colour their educational experiences for the rest of their lives. One day some of these students will be devising new ways to meet the needs of the next generation or the one after.

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