2016

You Want Coffee with That? Revisiting the Library as Place

Shelia Gaines
University of Memphis

The Christian Librarian is the official publication of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL). To learn more about ACL and its products and services please visit http://www.acl.org/

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Library and Information Science Commons

You Want Coffee with That? Revisiting the Library as Place

✝

Shelia Gaines, Head of Circulation
University of Memphis

ABSTRACT

The constantly changing roles of libraries and librarians, as well as the onslaught of electronic resources and mobile technology, have refocused attention on the library's place and value in today's society. This paper highlights a 2015 academic library conference presentation and includes supplemental information on the subject. It focuses on the library less as the traditional place to gather information and more as the meeting place – a third place – where like-minded individuals, their information-gathering devices in tow, enter and expect "super-sized" customer service.

Introduction

I witnessed the following exchange between two students at the circulation desk a few years ago:

Student: *(observing her friend staring as she checks out a book)* What?!

Friend: I just didn't think about people still checking out books here.

Student: It's a library. They have books.

Friend: I know, but it's just not a reason I think to come to the library. Studying, hanging out, grabbing a bite, yeah, but not to get books!

Student: Just stop talking! You're embarrassing me.

I was really interested to see where that conversation would have gone had the student allowed her friend to continue, but I was more intrigued by the way the first student's defense of the library contrasted with her friend's perception that today's students would not spend very much of their library time looking for books. This thought was emphasized in Tim Bucksnail's keynote address at the June 2015 Association of Christian Librarians Conference, where he reminded the delegates that while students still think of the library in terms of books, they are not coming to us for books, they are coming to us as a place (2015).

The traditional role of library services will always be there for some. For others the library may or may not begin or end as the physical or virtual place to gather information but rather as the physical place to gather. Current library literature reviewed for this paper frequently refers to the library as a "third place." Much of this

theory is based on the work of urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) in his book *The Great, Good Place*. Oldenburg (1989) describes a third place, distinct from home and work, where people can freely gather and interact. In this vein, Kate Meyrick (2007), presenting at the 2007 Australian Public Library Conference, suggested that the availability of food and drink, especially good coffee, is a key component of a good third place.

It is no secret that academic libraries are already in the process of changing into a more welcoming atmosphere and place. They are allowing restaurants to embed themselves in the library and opting for comfortable seating instead of traditional library building layout and design. For example, the University of Mississippi's J. D. Williams Library hosts a Starbucks, and Mississippi State University's library has Einstein's Bagels. Allowing these businesses within the library can generate warm and inviting feelings and can be expanded with programs that are filled with fun and sometimes learning elements (Thompson, 2012). The University of Memphis' McWherter Library also has Einstein's, located in the place that was designed to be the computer lab. The computer labs are now in the commons area on the first floor and in the center of each additional floor. Similarly, at Carson-Newman University, Maples Café now occupies the former cataloging department of the library.

Obviously, having coffee in the library is not as important as other services, but the concept of meeting the customers' needs and expectations by adding the coffee is key. It is helpful to think of it in terms of the once popular fast food restaurant phrase, "Do you want fries with that?" After asking this question for years and obviously getting more positive responses than negative, fast food restaurants began to offer combo meals that offered fries and drinks along with every hamburger. However, customers are still welcome to order just a hamburger if that is their preference.

Accordingly, in order to remain relevant in the lives of their customers, librarians must be aware of current customer expectations, but not at the expense of maintaining relevant items and services that are traditionally a part of the library. For instance, beyond responding, "Yes, we have that book in the stacks," we might also add that the book is available electronically. In other words, "Yes; and do you want coffee with that?" It does not matter if the library's "coffee" is actually ground from beans and purchased at Einstein's or comes in the form of added services such as e-books, laptops, and tablets available for check-out, online reference and distance education resources. Often, the answer to the question, "Do you want coffee with that?" is still, "Yes." However, it is important to remember that the two most important words in the question are "with that." These two words suggest that incorporating the needs of the traditional customer base is foundational.

Wherever you are in the paradigm of the debate on the library's current value as place, few people will argue that the library's place in *history* is in jeopardy. Jerry Campbell (2006), historical studies professor at University of Cincinnati, Clermont, called the academic library a cultural icon, reiterating the fact that our place in history is already set. We should concern ourselves with our future. He views the library less as a physical place and more of a virtual destination that has relinquished its place as the top source of inquiry in the face of digital technology.

Using the concept of the library as place synonymous with changing trends in physical and virtual library space, this paper looks at customer expectations of place in an academic library in particular, but also considers how those expectations relate to the changing role of both libraries and librarians in general.

In a 2011 blog post, Steve Haber (2011), president of Sony's Digital Reading Business wrote: "Today we are in the midst of a tremendous shift in the way Americans consume literature and other content, but one thing has not changed –the library must continue to play a central role in providing open and free access to information and ideas" (para. 1). Four years earlier, Mt. Gambier Public Library manager Cathryn Harris (2007) observed that public libraries were already in a unique position to become the next great good place (p. 145). In fact, a study sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2009 found that 69 percent of Americans 14 years of age or older visited a public library that year (Becker et al., p. 26). In a separate report, released in January 2013 by the American Library Association (2013), a high percentage of Americans rated borrowing books, reference librarians and free access to computers and the internet as a "very important" service of the library (p. 12).

Revisiting this whole concept is not to say that the library is losing its place in society so much as it is to say that the library is changing and growing to embed itself into a continually significant place in society (Campbell, 2007). We have moved from a place to gather information (closed stacks, quiet study, reference desks, and massive print collections) to become a gathering place (more space, open conversation, single service desks, social media presence).

Interestingly, in a 2014 Pew Research survey of participants who were at least 16 years old, 43% say they read in some format every day and 71% still agree that the public library services are important specifically because they promote literacy and the love of reading. They are also more likely to look at the closing of a local public library in terms of having a major impact on family or community (Zickhur & Ranie, 2014). That's the good news. The bad news is that the same study shows overall physical visits to the library were down from 2012. Furthermore, only 36% had visited a library website in the past year and only 19% felt they knew all or most of the services their library offers (Zickhur & Ranie, 2014).

So, we still have some marketing to do. This is true for both public and academic libraries. Marketing should not be the sole responsibility of the outreach librarian and/or library directors. A library presence at campus activities such as freshmen orientation, welcome week activities, and faculty workshops and related events are basically free advertising. In her book, *Creating the Customer-Driven Library*, Jeannette Woodward (2009) proposes that:

> Many ingredients are needed if one is to create a recipe for a successful academic library, but none is more essential than a core of satisfied customers who use the library themselves, encourage others to do the same, and spread the word that the library is alive and well in the twenty-first century (p. ix).

Dinah Harris (2012), former president of the Tennessee Library Association, echoed this sentiment from another perspective in the association's newsletter:

> The connection we make with our patrons is what will cause them to become advocates for the library…. That connection will not be made with 'business as usual' customer service. We must elevate our service to the 'knock-their-socks-off' level (p. 1).

If we continue to go beyond traditional expectations and offer customers "coffee" that will knock their socks off, we will cultivate relationships that will grow with changes in librarianship rather than lead them somewhere else that gives them those things we lack. The changing trends in libraries today can benefit the user, the libraries, and librarians if they are prepared for and handled correctly.

Susan Montgomery and Jonathan Miller (2011), in *The Third Place: The Library as Collaborative and Community Space in a Time of Fiscal Constraint*, admonish us to think of marketing and advocacy as ways to entice users back into the library building as the "place to be." They cited Bennet's survey article describing the library as a service place and learning place. As a service place, the traditional view of the library building where information is held, organized, and managed is still important. As a learning space, patrons recognize the main activity and focus of the library as facilitating social exchanges through which information is transformed into the knowledge of one person or group of persons (Montgomery & Miller, 2010).

A study conducted at California State University, San Marcos analyzed student use of the library's desktop computers and their own laptops (Thompson, 2012). The study concluded that despite the increased ownership of mobile technology, students clearly preferred to use desktop computers in the library and those students who used computers in the library were likely to use other library services and physical collections. This access to computers directly influenced the value of libraries as place:

> Given a choice of central computer labs, residence hall computers, and the library's information commons, most students preferred the computers in the library over the other computer locations, with more than half using the library computers more than once a week (Thompson, 2012, p. 146).

When I worked at Carson–Newman University, the provost came into the library one busy afternoon and saw students waiting in line to use the computers in the lab. He wondered why they did not just go to one of several other labs on campus. Although I had no knowledge of Thompson (2012) at this time, I was able to assure him that the library's lab was the students' lab of choice.

Even students who prefer mobile technology to desktop computers expect to find those technologies at their local library. More and more libraries are circulating tablets and accessories. The University of Memphis does not circulate tablets, but we do circulate laptops, headphones, GoPro cameras, calculators, and phone/tablet accessories.

Some sources suggest that instead of trying to decide which technology is best; libraries should strive to support multiple devices. This is what we had in mind at the University of Memphis when we requested accessories that were compatible with both Apple and Android products for our circulating technologies. When the opportunity to add new technologies presented itself, we already had a list of items that had been inquired about at one time or another. Therefore, we chose to add those items and advertise them to our students as we served them at the desk, and through campus events and library activities. Thus, we go back to the concept of giving added value to what we have to offer and marketing ourselves to the customer as the best place to receive those services.

In the book *Spaces of Geographical Thought*, John Agnew (2005) writes, "In the simplest sense space refers to location somewhere and place to the occupation of that location. Space is about having an address and place is about living at that address. Place is specific and space is general" (p. 82).

I often hear students giving a tour of the library tell prospective students, "I practically live in the library." That is a good thing. That means they see it as a habitable place. When I worked at Carson–Newman University, one of our former work-study students did practically live in the library. We finally gave him his own desk because when we asked him why he spent so much time in the library, he told us the library was his safe place.

While Harris (2007) obviously had no way of knowing that I would reference her article for this paper, her title, *Libraries with Lattes: The New Third Place,* certainly foreshadowed the overall concept. Consider Bryson, Usherwood and Proctor's

(2003) description of the library in their work, *Libraries Must Also Be Buildings?: New Library Impact Study*: "Buildings that are well designed and managed offer an array of resources that enable people and groups to establish relationships, carry on conversations, exchange ideas, and engage the life of the mind" (p. 70). All of these concepts point to the notion of how the library fits into the life of the user rather than how the library thinks the user should be told to view the library. The use of the library should be affected by the way in which people use the space. Furthermore, Bryson et al. (2003) describes the library as being one of the following at any given time: a meeting place, a learning resource, and a comfortable and relaxing space (p. 70). The evidence presented in this paper certainly supports that. Pay careful attention to the last item in this partial list from Meyrick's ten practical ways for a library to be recognized as a third place:

1. Create a brand.

2. Respond to community identity.

3. Aggregate and cluster.

4. Encourage discovery.

5. Fantastic design and fabulous people (2007).

Meyrick (2007) adds that if nothing else is achieved, make sure you have the best coffee in town. Again, it is not about having coffee in the library but meeting the customers' needs. Consider this: Starbucks are not usually very big. Someone suggested most customers do not go in there to stay for long periods of time; they get their coffee and make it a part of their lives. They take it to work and bring it to the library. Another phrase I often hear students recite to tour groups in the library supports this sentiment: "The great thing about the library is you can eat and drink in here. So, you can grab a cup of coffee and a bagel at Einstein's and come to the library and study or you can just hang out."

While providing food and drink is considered one of the key elements of good third place criteria, the other two key elements are being easy to get to and having an inviting design that encourages lingering or promotes community. In this paper's introductory exchange between the two students, the friend's description of the library as a place to hang out is synonymous with lingering and promoting community. The students who were waiting in line for the computers in the lab were not doing so because there were no other computers available on campus. They were waiting because they wanted to be in the library.

In anticipation of challenges that threaten the future vitality of this type of commitment to the academic library, we might follow the example of those such as Dartmouth College. When building a new library, while the library task force wanted to design a library that would fulfil their academic purpose to the students,

they still wanted the students, faculty and community to consider the library as that 'good, great, place' to hang out.

Freeman (2014) describes the library as:

> [The] only centralized location where new and emerging information technologies can be combined with traditional knowledge resources in a user-focused, service-rich environment that supports today's social and educational patterns of learning, teaching, and research. Whereas the internet has tended to isolate people, the library, as a physical place, has done just the opposite. Within the institution, as a reinvigorated, dynamic learning resource, the library can once again become the centerpiece for establishing the intellectual community and scholarly enterprise (para. 7).

Freeman also states that "The academic library as place holds a unique position on campus. No other building can so symbolically and physically represent the academic heart of an institution" (2014, p. 9).

However, many academic institutions are also in the position of having to do more with less due to financial constraints. In *Facelifts for Special Libraries*, Bassett, Fry, and Ballantyne-Scott (2011) offer viable solutions:

> If you can't afford to build a new library or even do major renovations, there are several easy inexpensive renovations strategies that can transform your dull library space into the "place" to be. Even small transformations can improve your library's place within the community.
>
> 1. Get rid of outdated furniture.
> 2. Replace unsteady shelving units.
> 3. Put on a fresh coat of paint.
> 4. Install new carpet.
> 5. Fix broken website links.
> 6. Explore mobile communication (pp. 79-137).

As Freeman (2014) concludes in his essay, the library symbolically and physically represents the academic heart of an institution and in order to remain a dynamic life force, it must support the academic community in several new ways. These ways must be sensitive to ever-changing customer expectations without disregard for the unique legacy and traditions of the institution of which it is part.

Libraries must embrace their own distinct functions. The library as a place can "enhance the excitement and adventure of the academic experience, foster a sense of community, and advance the institution into the future" (Freeman, 2014, last paragraph).

Starbucks did not invent coffee, they just revolutionized it. You can get hundreds of different combinations of coffee espresso at Starbucks, but they also serve tea, juice, and water. So, balance your library's needs with the needs of the customer when designing future services. Think customer service with the customer, not the abundance of products, in mind. ✚

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheila Gaines is the Head of Circulation at McWherter Library at University of Memphis in Memphis, TN. She can be reached at sgaines1@memphis.edu.

REFERENCES

Agnew, John. (2005) Space: Place. In P. Cloke & R. Johnston (Eds.), *Spaces of geographical thought* (pp. 81-96). London: Sage Publications.

American Library Association. (2013). *State of America's libraries*. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2013

Bassett, D., Fry, J., & Ballantyne-Scott, B. (2011). *Facelifts for special libraries: A practical guide to revitalizing diverse physical and digital spaces.* Oxford: Chandos Publishing.

Becker, S., Crandal, M. D., Fisher, K. E., Kinney, K., Landry, C., & Rocha, A. (2010). *Opportunity for all: How the American public benefits from internet access at U. S. Libraries.* (IMLS-2010-RES-01). Institute of Museum and Library Services, Washington, D.C.

Bryson, J., Underwood, B., & Proctor, R. (2003). *Libraries must also be buildings? New libraries impact study.* Retrieved from University of Sheffield: Centre for Public Libraries and Information in Society website: https://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.128117!/file/CPLIS---New-Library-Impact-Study.pdf

Bucksnail, Tim. (2015). Innovation and cooperation: Managing change in the 21st century library. *Association of Christian Librarians Conference*, Carson-Newman University, Jefferson, City, TN.

Campbell, Jerry D. (2006). Changing a cultural icon: The academic library as a virtual destination. *Educause Review, 41*(1), 16-30.

Freeman, G. (2014). The library as place: Changes in learning patterns, collections, technology and use. *Council on Library and Information Resources, Publication 129*, n. p.

Haber, S. (2011, May 5). The changing role of libraries in the digital age [blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-haber/the-changing-role-of-libr_b_803722.html

Harris, C. (2007). Libraries with lattes: The new third place. *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services, 20*(4), 145-152.

Harris, D. (2012). President's point of view. *The TLA Newsletter, 18* (4), 1.

Howard, J. (2012, July 16). At libraries, quiet makes a comeback. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/At-Libraries-Quiet-Makes-a/132885

Meyrick, K. (August, 2007). *Public libraries as the 3rd place – What does this mean?* Paper presented at the Public Libraries Conference, Adelaide, Australia.

Montgomery, S. & Miller, J. (2011). The third place: The library as collaborative and community space in a time of fiscal restraint. *College & Undergraduate Libraries, 18*(2-3), 228-238.

Oldenburg, Ray. (1989). *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of the community.* New York: Paragon House.

Thompson, S. (2012). Student use of library computers: Are desktop computers still relevant in today's libraries? *Technology and Libraries, 31*(4), 20-33.

Woodward, J. (2009). *Creating the customer-driven library.* Chicago: American Library Association.

Zickhur, K., & Ranie, L. (2014). *Younger Americans & public libraries.* Retrieved from Pew Research Center website: http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/09/10/younger-americans-and-public-libraries/