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"Can the Research Library Teach?" A North American Perspective on the Teaching Library[1]

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It was for me a particular pleasure and unexpected honor to be asked to commence your conference on the teaching library with a North American perspective. As a young man traveling around Europe more than forty years ago, after a year's study of theology at the University of Edinburgh, I first visited Switzerland and Bern and it is a delight to be back again. From that period in 1956, I have vague memories of several jokes about Americans or by Americans about themselves. One quoted us as saying, and obviously believing, that "bei uns in Amerika, ist alles veil besser, oder groesser, oder schneller, usw." We of course had similar jokes about Texas where everything did seem bigger if not better. But the words have remained with me as a corrective to any arrogant or exaggerated claims of American superiority, national or individual, in any field of human endeavor and I have often felt a more welcome perspective in

1 Paper presented at LIBER Annual General Conference 1997, Bern.

pluralism, of different people facing similar tasks in different ways, each able to learn from the perspectives of others. What I have to say tonight then I hope will be received more as descriptive than prescriptive; I know what I am attempting is almost impossible, a library address with no moral imperatives, but I am going to try.

When I accepted the assignment several months ago to speak about the teaching library and the research library, I knew that it presented considerable difficulties just to be accurately descriptive of constantly evolving conditions in American higher education, changes which are leading to altered priorities in what research libraries are expected to do. I knew that definition itself would be a problem since we have no clear current definitions of the terms we are using such as "research library," "teaching library," or more recently the "learning library." I do not know how LIBER defines a research library, but I can tell you that our Association of Research Libraries, an association of 121 of the largest university and other libraries in the United States and Canada, has no idea of what the term means other than to describe those libraries that meet its criteria for membership. It can easily be argued that those criteria, primarily quantitative and based on size, exclude many true research libraries while including some libraries which do relatively little to support research; the statistics also fail to measure the quality of services in those institutions.

Further compounding the difficulty of this topic is a very significant shift in higher education in the United States toward emphasis on the student, particularly undergraduate students (18 to 22 year old students in the U.S.), now renamed our "customers," whose needs and wishes are seen as paramount in our planning. This has been a very pervasive trend, first motivated by budgetary concerns about declining enrollments and high fees (especially in

private universities), second by public relations worries over the declining prestige of higher education (especially among influential legislators with little understanding of the contributions of specialized research), third by declining public funding for such research, and finally by each institution's concern to remain competitive with other universities and colleges.

The March OCLC Annual Conference of Research Library Directors, for example, started with President E. Gordon Gee of Ohio State University citing the need "to become student-centered universities" as the first priority in higher education today. Implicit, though seldom explicit, is an assumption that resources will follow this goal by transfer of human and financial resources to student interests and away from the research enterprise, given that few new resources are available to help make the transition.

For six years my own University, Syracuse, has tried to bridge this gap by describing itself as a leading "Student-Centered Research University," and has devoted substantial resources, in the midst of budget reductions across the University, to provide some real substance to the concept by attempting to involve more undergraduate students in the research process. In the Library we have used the vehicle of our Special Collections and its large array of primary research resources (rare books, archives, literary and historical manuscripts, etc.) to attract undergraduates to the research potential of such sources, and there have been other modest successes across campus. That unit of the Library has not yet taken the next logical step of working with faculty in developing collaborative courses related to these resources to engage students in developing hypertextual data bases around these resources, but that is sure to come as it has elsewhere in the Library and elsewhere throughout the country. I should add that we have undertaken almost

all of this activity with privately raised funds outside of our normal operating budgets.

However well we are able to bridge this apparent gap between research and teaching, it seems clear to me that the implications of these changes in many of our academic institutions will have profound effects on the research aspirations of many universities leading to unintended consequences which we cannot yet predict. That in turn creates ambiguity for the Library and what its priorities should be in what can be seen as competing worlds of research and teaching. It would be far healthier to view teaching and research not as bipolar modes but as mutually supportive endeavors, but that is not what seems now to be happening in the United States.

Hastening this transition in many universities has been the development of TQM, total quality management programs, bringing business and industrial models to universities by emphasizing service to the "customer," introducing terminology and methodology often uncongenial to the academic, and helping again to shift the balance from the mature but expensive researcher to the unsophisticated but paying undergraduate. Many aspects of the total quality programs have been salubrious, forcing debate about strongly held assumptions and inflexible processes, encouraging wider participation in problem resolution, and in fact often improving services to students and other Library users. But the movement, pervasive throughout higher education in the U.S., has not had much apparent effect in the improvement of teaching, nor helped bridge the gap between the professoriate and university administrators. To be fair, issues related to excellence in teaching are being addressed in other ways, but seldom within the context of TQM programs.

All of the foregoing, however oversimplified, should help to provide something of the context in which the concept of the

"Teaching Library" has emerged and developed in the United States over the past ten or more years. When Carla Stoffle argues that "the shift to the teaching library requires a shift in emphasis to users and their needs," (*New Directions for Higher Education*, No. 90 (1995), p. 72), I would counter that research libraries have always emphasized users and their needs, but that the shifts in higher education outlined above have imposed a change in who our primary users are, and in the primary ways in which we serve them. It simply doesn't make sense to argue that the "user" was only discovered in the late twentieth century.

There are many virtues in the student-oriented approach, but one of the casualties for research libraries has been or will be the decline in research collections and collecting as we have known them, however that loss may be offset by expanded access to Internet resources. Undergraduate needs seldom include extensive research collections as we have tried to build them in the past. Serial cancellation programs, a steep decline in non-English language acquisitions, and the additional costs and shift of resources to leased electronic resources, all reflect a de-emphasis on building physical collections while we devote more attention to perceived student needs. With notable exceptions, such as various projects for digitizing scholarly information, a preponderance of our local efforts and expenses toward expanded electronic access are directed toward very generalized information more useful for student papers than faculty monographs.

None of this should be understood as critical of the idea of the teaching library, of the need for responsiveness to students, or the University's responsibility to prepare its students for lives filled with technological change. I would argue that the Research Library has always been a component of University teaching, just as it has always

been a component of the University's information business. Technology is changing the ways in which both roles are performed, forcing reevaluation of time-honored but now threatened modes of collecting information and of bibliographic instruction in and through the Library, promising more effective and efficient ways of meeting both needs, and placing us in a position to help faculty restructure their teaching and their students to exploit information sources in their own learning processes, individual or collaborative. It has forced us to shift our perspectives on the research library and what it has to offer. It forces us to imagine, if we can, the experience of using a research library from the chair or terminal of the student, to understand that student's need for guidance, interpretation, explanation, evaluation--teaching of the kind we do best.

While the expansion of technology in our institutions has enhanced the teaching possibilities of research libraries it has also helped us realize that we cannot teach alone, that collaborations across the campus with faculty, with computing services, with our university presses, with any interested partners, are a prerequisite of a successful transition. We have seen some very successful models of electronically based teaching libraries in the United States developing over the past five years, particularly at the Universities of Iowa, Southern California, Washington, and California at Berkeley, to name just a few. I won't describe them here but you can find them all on the Web as well as in physical places on each campus. Some have developed Centers for Scholarly Technology, others have emphasized work on Excellence in Teaching, still others have instituted credit courses for undergraduates helping prepare students for technology-based courses elsewhere in the curriculum. Even the New York Public Library, a research library par excellance, has taken on a major teaching role for the general public in its new Science and

Business Information Library, and plans to expand the program to all of its facilities, another example of changing priorities of service.

All of these efforts require strong partnerships and collaborations among many participants in order to be effective. There are so many apparent dichotomies buried in these issues that need resolution cooperatively: paper versus electronic media, teaching versus research, instruction versus learning, computing services versus the library, certainty versus change. All the participants require adaptability and flexibility to create a continuum of responsibility for teaching and learning among computing, libraries, and faculty, a continuum which is threatening only to those whose concern is more with territorial boundaries than with the missions and goals of our service.

In some American institutions a kind of collaboration has been achieved by administrative fiat through the merging of Computing Services and Library Services in one office, a prospect that has been particularly frightening to more traditional librarians. The fear that the computing-oriented information czars in such positions will further divert resources from materials to technology is partially justified, but that change is naturally occurring under bona fide librarians as well. I can only report that the convergence of libraries and computing centers in the U.S. is not a widespread movement, with no more than six or eight instances within Association of Research Libraries members, and most of their leaders appointed from within the ranks of librarians. It is not a major concern in the United States but warrants more consideration as a way of creating partnerships for the teaching library which will require both the knowledge and organizational skills of librarians, the technical skills of computing specialists, and the training of staff who can do both well.

A greater danger in the potential conflict of resources comes from those who have accepted the exaggerations of the information industry that everything you will need to know is digitized already, or will be soon, and there should be no need for libraries in the University of the future. This is often the wishful thinking of University administrators or Trustees who ask at Dartmouth, for example, why a new library is needed, at Harvard why Widener Library needs to be renovated, at Syracuse why we haven't digitized all the science materials to avoid a costly renovation. We librarians ourselves are somewhat responsible for this outcome by having embraced technology so eagerly from its beginning, but it leaves us with a massive educational task not only for our students.

I hope I've given you something of a perspective, however fragmentary, on the present situation in the U.S. relating to various aspects of the teaching library. Not all of my ARL colleagues would agree with my views, but most of us would share a sense of pervasive flux and uncertainty in the future of libraries and of their role in information provision as well as teaching/learning amid a volatile world of technological innovation, panaceas and false starts, risky guesses on what is most needed and what most likely to prove of enduring value. For some of our colleagues this uncertainty results in a pre-millennial anxiety that tends to hold fast to things as they were; for others the risk and ambiguities of the present represent exciting intellectual opportunities. For most of us, both tendencies are intermingled in varying degrees, but of one thing we have relative certainty, that this transitional condition of flux between the traditional print-based services and the future potentialities will last far longer than we had thought or that many claim. It is also clear to many of us that enhanced electronic access propels expanded use of print. The need to draw a balance between these apparently

conflicting forces, or at least in Richard Lanham's term, oscillate between them, places a premium on flexibility and a tolerance for ambiguity sometimes difficult to achieve but essential for adaptability to changing circumstances.

During my preparation for this talk I have read widely, if not deeply, in the literature of information technology, teaching libraries, gateways to knowledge, computing-library connections, etc. One would have thought that technology would have made the literature easier to find but the searching terms are far "noisier" than I would have imagined. It took browsing through both the Web and the stacks to come up with enough to get a general picture, and frankly the landscape of this literature, at least in English, is pretty dreary. Apart from the generally ineffective literary style, the worst depict a Library under siege with the hand-wringing of the "what will ever become of us?" school of thought, a question addressed by platitudes, and a prose peppered with proactive paradigms and dotted with shoulds, oughts, dont's, and musts, the moral imperatives of what we must do to save ourselves. The best, often from outside librarianship, are less fearful (even when highly critical of technology), tend to welcome innovation and even inevitable change, and are stylistically far more engaging. Let me end with an example from the latter group, a prolific science-fiction writer named Robert Silverberg speaking at a 1992 conference titled "Information for a New Age: Fantastic Technology or Institutionalized Alienation":

"I see that some of you have managed to frighten yourselves, if I'm correct in understanding the theme of this program.... And I said at the opening that I don't see any dichotomy there. The "Fantastic Technology" will indeed result in "Institutionalized Alienation," if it's allowed to. It will also provide you with a way of scanning through an entire bibliography in a tenth of a second looking for the references

to whatever molecule...Dr. Asimov was talking about." [Silverberg was here referring to a 1955 article by Isaac Asimov called "The Sound of Panting," dealing with the desperation of keeping up with the chemical literature in the 1950s]. Silverberg goes on:

"The power to mess ourselves up is always in our hands. And it's easy indeed to make dire predictions of what is going to be.... Nobody, including Dr. Asimov with his punch cards, could have foreseen that in 1955. The problems that he was facing then, which caused him to write the essay "The Sound of Panting," now seem laughable. *Chemical Abstracts*, I'm sure, is on CD-ROM, though, if it isn't, it will be next year. And it will then be possible to put the lovely little disk into the machine and type in "thiotimoline"..., and get back not only all the available information on thiotimoline but neat printouts, stapled and bound, if necessary. None of this was imaginable in the days of the Alexandrian Library. Somehow we got from there to here; somehow we, and you particularly, will get from here to the terrifying twenty-first century." (*Information for a New Age: Redefining the Librarian*, 1995, p. 7, 10.)

Need I say more, or must I end with the moral imperatives, to keep at it, to expect change, to take risks, to keep learning, to keep teaching? I hope not. Thank you for your attention.