Insights into library services and users from qualitative research

Yvonna S. Lincoln

Department EAHR, 4226 TAMU, Texas A&M University, 511 Harrington Tower, College Station, TX 77843–4226, USA. E-mail address: ysl@tamu.edu (Y.S. Lincoln).

Abstract

In a study of users’ perceptions of library service quality, interview data were used to restructure and reorient SERVQUAL, a widely employed survey administered to customers to determine quality of service rendered. When adapted to library users’ perceptions of service quality, the new instrument, LibQUAL™ was configured as a Web-based survey, and administered to over 22,000 users of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) libraries in North America. The data reported on here are comprised of the original interview data used to ground the Web-based survey. Interpretive and culturally-based analyses are offered as hypotheses for why the data were categorized as they were. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

I have been asked to address the topic of qualitative methods in library research, and I want to approach that from a particular perspective. I reviewed some of the early literature on qualitative methods in library research more than a decade ago (Lincoln, 1989), and found then what I find now. Some researchers are advocating an expanded repertoire of research methods, especially as a way of getting at aspects of context which are inaccessible via traditional or conventional assessment methods, such as surveys and questionnaires. Others strongly seek a mixed-methods approach, where some qualitative research is incorporated into a study, but essentially, the research remains unremoved from the “technology of
control” associated with conventional research. Others, more versed in the purposes and meanings which form the foundation of phenomenological and interpretive inquiry, see possibilities which might illuminate aspects of libraries, library services, and library users’ perspectives in ways we have not had access to in previous research. In short, library research seems to be spread across a wider spectrum of acceptance and perceived utility, just as is research in many other academic disciplines, including my own.

2. Nature of research undertaken

The research which I shall use as background for this article derives from a much larger study on user perceptions of quality in Association for Research Libraries member libraries across North America (Heath, Cook, Lincoln, & Thompson, 2000), funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education. The study’s purpose was to assess user perceptions of quality in these libraries, and to prepare recommendations about the ways in which major research libraries (and perhaps others) might improve services and/or collections from the perspectives of serious users.

2.1. User perceptions of quality

The contract came at a propitious time. A national assessment of user perceptions had not been undertaken for some years, and research libraries, like the universities in which most of them (but not all) reside, had been undergoing a revolution in technology. As Rowena Cullen (2001, pp. 662–663, cited in Cook, 2001, p. 79) has observed:

Academic libraries are currently facing their greatest challenge since the explosion in tertiary education and academic publishing which began after World War II. The global digital revolution is affecting both the traditional forms of the creation, organization and dissemination of knowledge, and the world of [higher] education itself. The alliance of business and universities to create a new paradigm of ... [higher] education, and the emergence of the virtual university, supported by the virtual library, calls into question many of our basic assumptions about the role of the academic library, and the security of its future. Retaining and growing their customer base, and focusing more energy on meeting their customers’ expectations is the only way for academic libraries to survive in this volatile environment.

This revolution in technology has, for many research libraries, swept away more than a thousand years of history. From the historical record of the great library at Alexandria—one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—a library has been a repository of all that is

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1 The views and interpretations expressed in this work do not necessarily represent those of the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education. Beyond that disclaimer, the views expressed herein do not necessarily represent either the views or interpretations of other co-Principal Investigators. The interpretations made are solely my own, although they are filtered through a set of other interpretive experiences and literatures which might well be useful to library researchers.
known, and speculations about what remains to be known. They have acted as the major
stakeholder and conservator of the cultural mind.

Today, they act in some cases like cultural stockbrokers, acquiring and redistributing the
commodities known as scholarly work and knowledge (Lincoln, 1998), sometimes like E * Trade\textsuperscript{TM}, without ever having any face-to-face contact with their major users. In an era
when knowledge and information themselves have begun to occupy a place which is less
cultural treasure than pricey commodity, we might have foreseen this new set of relationships
between libraries and their users coming. Sad to say, we failed to foresee this new set of
relationships, because we were not able to connect libraries and library research with other
bodies of research which identified and criticized the commodification of knowledge and the
corporatization of faculty worklife (Lincoln, 1998).

2.2. The role of \textit{LibQUAL}\textsuperscript{+}\textsuperscript{TM}

\textit{LibQUAL}\textsuperscript{+}\textsuperscript{TM} was developed utilizing the \textit{SERVQUAL} instrument first developed by
Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1988), experts in services marketing, for the purpose of
assessing the quality of service delivered by users of the service. While it had been used in a
variety of library environments in its original form\textsuperscript{2} (i.e., as \textit{SERVQUAL}), the adaptation of
the \textit{SERVQUAL} instrument to a Web-based instrument grounded in actual users’ perspec-
tives extracted from qualitative data did not occur until the year 2000. (It should be noted
here, however, that many of the constructs of \textit{SERVQUAL} were expected, and indeed,
found—although labeled differently—in preliminary analyses of the qualitative data.) Cook
and Heath (1999, 2000) found three additional dimensions to the earlier service quality
constructs, however, which were responsive to the roles and functions of research libraries
vis-à-vis their patrons and users, and those constructs were incorporated into the reconfigured
and revised \textit{LibQUAL}\textsuperscript{+} instrument. Those three new dimensions—Library as Place, Access,
and Self-Reliance—speak to research libraries as unique sites and contexts in human
experience. The other dimensions of library service quality—Affect of Service, Reliability,
Assurance, Empathy, Tangibles—have been used in somewhat different ways from the
original and intended use of \textit{SERVQUAL}, but tend to be parallel to their introductory and
primary meanings, so it is not particularly useful to deconstruct them today.

2.3. Qualitative database

The original qualitative database on which my remarks are based was derived from
interviews at a dozen Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institutions, and now consists
of interviews at over 30 ARL institutions. Most of those data have been subjected to a
unitization and categorization process which will be familiar to analysts performing formal
content analyses, and the results entered into a computer-managed qualitative analysis

\textsuperscript{2} For a complete description of the academic and research library tests of \textit{SERVQUAL}, see Cook 2001
pp. 35ff.
program, ATLAS-ti™, in order to array all the data in a category simultaneously. It is from that database that I draw my own analyses of what the qualitative data mean.

3. What qualitative research has shown us

For observations of what the qualitative data analysis might have shown us, and for a new interpretive framework, I want to begin with Cook’s (2001) original analyses. In the first analysis, the data arrayed themselves as shown in Figure 1 (which may be correctly interpreted as the categories and sub-categories of the content analyses).

In Figure 2, which is the second analysis, or reanalysis, the representative model changes. Notice the differences in the two models: in the second model, the “self-reliant user” has disappeared.

My comments will revolve about interpreting these data in a way that does not undermine the original analyses, but rather extends the original category creation process for the purposes of explaining, extending, illuminating, and, to some extent, unraveling,

![Fig. 1. Original category analysis model (source: Cook, 2001).](image-url)
what our respondents have said. I have done this for two reasons. First, I have utilized for my analysis the original figure, Figure 1, because it retains the user and his or her social constructions of the library at the center of the analyses. Second, retaining users at the center of the analyses reminds audiences for this research that transactions between users and librarians and libraries are not “goods received,” nor are they necessarily services rendered in the traditional sense. Rather these transactions are social, cultural and cognitive-intellectual “performances.” They are ethnodramas with the power to affirm or deny user constructions of self-efficacy or mastery.

Earlier presentations and publications of these data have relied on strict description and statistical presentation for their meaning. The following analysis depends much more heavily on interpretive and culturally-grounded uses for the qualitative database, and therefore, represents an attempt to connect library users constructions with other bodies of research and interpretive social science. For this additional insight, I have relied on Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) idea of “habitus,” on Fiske’s (1991) formulations of texture and density as analytic categories in cultural analyses, and also on Foucault’s (1972) idea of individuation as a special kind of disciplinary mechanism formulated and directed by the state or other official channels.
3.1. “Habitus”

Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) idea of “habitus” is a complex one, but it embodies the meanings and implications of habitat, not simply where one lives, but where one dwells; habitant, the complex individuals who dwell and inhabit those places; and all the processes of habituation—the dwelling-in—and habit, “particularly habits of thought” (Fiske, 1991, p. 155). Fiske elaborates on this concept by observing that the habitat is a social environment in which we live. It is a product of both its position in the social space and of the practices of the social beings who inhabit it. The social space is, for Bourdieu, a multidimensional map of the social order in which the main axes are economic capital, cultural capital, education, class, and historical trajectories; in it, the material, the symbolic and the historical are not separate categories but interactive lines of force whose positions and operations structure the macro-social order, the practices of those who inhabit different positions and moments of it, and their cultural tastes, ways of thinking, of ‘dispositions’ (p. 155).

4. Library as place

If we use the term “habitus” for the moment as a lens through which to view the emergent category of “Library as Place,” we can see how Bourdieu’s definition begins to limn the category. “Library” is a utilitarian place, much as a house is. Both provide shelter, a place to conduct the material practices for which they were designed. Habitat, in its narrowest sense, is a place to live, a place to find shelter from the elements, a place to prepare meals, to sleep, to raise a family, or to listen to one’s favorite music. Library-as-habitat is also a shelter, although for texts, in the broadest sense. For texts, libraries’ utilitarian product is the protection and conservation of texts; it is a place where texts—and other resources—find material safety.

There are, however, two other aspects of “Library as Place:” library as symbol and library as refuge. Respondents made fascinating connections to the timelessness of the concept of the library as place, including its connection through time to other libraries in other cultures. One said, “It’s beyond the ease [with] which you can find information, just because the library experience is something like Greece or Athens…” [I14.UA.12.17.99, Undergrad]. Another, a professor in business, characterized the ideal library as “… need[ing] to welcome them [students] in. It needs to make them feel like this is a place where they can be in almost a haven, a refuge, in a sense. This is a lot about what a university is about” [I6: H, M, Assoc. Prof., Mgmt.]. In the eyes of these individuals, the library has an historical trajectory—that is, it is connected to the great libraries of the ancient world—and it serves as a retreat—a “haven,” a “refuge”—in a symbolic sense, for the work of the mind, just as did the great libraries of the ancient and medieval world.

Another scholar comments that, when he sat in the library, “writing [his] undergraduate thesis with this big dome over [his] head…” he “felt really like a scholar” [I 11.UAz. 12.16.99, Prof.-Ling.]. And yet another expressively recalled that being in a particular library,
writing on the dissertation, “was an emotional experience.” In the sense that Bourdieu used “habitus,” these scholars sense a coming-together for themselves of the symbolic (writing in the library is what scholars do), the material (the big dome, symbol of library space, over his head, or the Gothic architecture of a small, elite library), and the historical (this kind of work, in this kind of place, is an eternal symbol of the scholar). Yet another scholar envisioned that the library could become “a cultural center, and not just an archive” [I13.AU, Assoc. Prof.-Eng]. The material and symbolic practices which define library as habitus are operating in these individuals, as both habits of thinking and as “dispositions” toward seeing the library—a library—as a particular “habitus” of the scholar and the scholarly mind.

Library as place is often a larger part of the “habitus” of individuals and the university alike, however, when students must utilize the space for studying and research because they are commuting students. Cook (2001) characterizes the role of universities here as “serving as a home away from home for the length of the academic day,” because such libraries are located in urban, metropolitan universities, where lengthy commutes by largely adult learners are impractical, if not impossible (p. 144). One respondent recognized this need for intellectual “habitus” when he said

> Because it’s a metropolitan school, [it] has a lot of students that use the library for studying. ... One of the problems that we’ve had here has been high-priced study space. We’ve built floors to hold books and they hold students studying, and it’s probably not the most efficient use of the investment in infrastructure, but it’s essential because many of the students here commute. Between classes, the library is a convenient study space [I29. 22. Prof-Geog].

For the students of whom he speaks, the library has become an alternate “habitus,” a place where material practices (studying, doing research for papers) meet the symbolic need for a “home away from home,” where home and neighborhood experiences are substituted for by study, schooling and intellectual experiences, which become the temporary, “other” habitat.

5. Access

Access, too, has implications far beyond the instrumental to which we so often refer. While Figures 1 and 2 are slightly different, they essentially refer to the same characteristics: the formats in which materials may be accessed, the timeliness of access, the convenience of access—that is, the point at which access can be made.

Access, however, speaks to larger themes and issues. The instrumental issues—formats, convenience, timeliness—can act as major irritations and annoyances, and will lower the perception of user satisfaction and sense of service quality. Other issues, however, may be drawn from the category of access. Access is far more than merely information access. It is a sense of comfort in navigation in environments, a feel for some “habitus” as possessing a welcoming, familiar sense to it. Ease of access has as much to do with the “texture” (Fiske, 1991), the richness, and the invitational quality, of some milieu as it does to the ability to acquire resources within it.
The acquisition of resources may be thought of as the minimal, or instrumental, impact of the access question. Texture, “habitus,” emotional climate, the material practices of libraries, the “surround” for users are major determinants of service quality perception, even though they are not measurable on any survey form. Fiske (1991) makes the point that

Objects are comparatively easy for the investigator to describe and transcribe from one habitus to another, but the specificities of their context and the practiced ways of living are much more resistant; they constitute a culture which is best experienced from the inside and difficult to study from without (p. 158).

Substitute “service” for “objects,” and the point becomes clearer. Libraries perform many of the same functions across the continent. Perceptions of service quality, however, are not transferable, and they abide within a culture and a habitus difficult to know without the living of it, within it, and constituting daily material practices around it. Thus, access is not merely access to resources, or what one faculty member referred to as “having things so transparent that you don’t really need too many encounters with human beings to navigate [it].” Access also has material, symbolic, cultural, historical and class overtones, which operate not separate from one another, but along intersecting axes, and which act to constitute a set of expectations, comfort zones, and individual narratives about library usage, library access, the availability of appropriate human and textual resources, and possibility of invitation into its sphere.

No instruments measure the density or intensity of the experiences surrounding libraries. Our best hope is simply to ask users, who will, we hope, tell us about their own experiences, from which we might interpret and situate their constructed habitus.

6. Self-reliance

The third domain identified in the category analysis was self-reliance, the ability — and the desire — to navigate the library, and all its textual and digital resources, independent or almost independent, of library staff. Frequently, this creation of self-reliance involved one of two “behavioral strategies” (Cook, 2001, p. 151). First, some users interact with librarians with the goal of building their own information gathering skills. Once equipped with a skill set for navigating the library “… their goal is to venture off on their own as quickly as possible to find what they need … [Other] users seek out a trusted librarian colleague to establish a point of contact for assistance. These users develop an enduring relationship with a librarian and are confident that when they are in need, assistance will be delivered. This group also has a goal of self-reliance in navigating the labyrinthine information universe on their own terms” (Cook, 2001, pp. 151–152).

In other words, some of the users interviewed who were pursuing self-reliance in the world of the library worked sometimes, or often, with library staff, and deeply appreciated the competence and agility of the staff in locating rare, obscure, or hard-to-find resources, but many new users do not seek out such services, or seek them out only until they achieve a minimal level of competence themselves.
More than once, interviewees reported that they do their own searches, because they are more familiar with the language, the discourses, the terminologies of their own disciplines, than many or most of the librarians whose help they might enlist. In much the same way, the vast resources of the World Wide Web and Internet are fostering a kind of self-reliance among users. One professor, when asked how he commenced a piece of research, commented that, “Well, first thing, I would turn to the best search engines that are out there. That’s not a person so much as an entity. In this sense, librarians are search engines [just] with a different interface” (156: 14: 145-154 [SR71]; quoted in Cook, 2001, p. 153). And a graduate student commented that

By habit, I usually try to be self-sufficient. And I’ve found that I am actually fairly proficient. I usually find what I’m looking for, eventually. So I personally tend to ask librarians things only as a last resort. Part of it, again, is because of this self-sufficiency streak I have (I37: 26: 340-343 [SR31]).

7. Physical and virtual space

This sense of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and self-efficacy is not uniformly spread throughout the realm of users. It does appear, however, sufficiently often to give the sense that a new kind of user of libraries is emerging. Users are changing. For the first time in history, users interact freely and comfortably with two realities: the physical and the virtual.

We think of users as real people, in a real, tangible world, just as we have always thought of libraries as real buildings, with real books and journals—a very physical, tangible reality. But users are now sometimes, for all intents and purposes, virtual people, interacting with virtual services and virtual and digitized libraries and materials. Increasingly, as users learn to navigate the virtual world on their own, they also wish to navigate the physical world self-reliantly. Users now see themselves differently, and they have different needs, and want different kinds of access.

In the physical reality, “texture” has become important. Density of resources has become important. Completeness of collections becomes important, and, if collections are not complete, users want to know where they can find missing volumes, journal articles, and/or how swiftly interlibrary loan will work for them. Users in the physical world are also concerned about the “habitus” aspects of libraries. Cook (2001) characterized the minimal level of habitus quality as “comfortable functionality,” and this is a good term. Habitus, however, intersects with the symbolic aspects of libraries to create overlays of meaning, culture, historical import, beauty (for some, at least), academic tradition, reinforcement of scholarly life and scholarly desire, and allure. The library, for some, has become an intellectual provocation, a temptation from which treasures might be plucked.

At the virtual level, users are less interested in the “comfortable functionality,” which they are able to create in their own workspaces, at their office workstations, or even at home.
Access to digital materials has made the habitus of the physical space less important than the habitus of the access space—which is frequently not in the physical library itself.

8. Foucault and self-reliance

This is a reading of the question of self-reliance through Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) perspective. That perspective takes into account both the internal and the external aspects of habitus, including economic and cultural capital, education, class, and personal, as well as social, historical trajectories (Fiske, 1991, pp. 154–156). A second reading of self-reliance, however, through the perspective of Foucault (1995), lends a very different interpretation of the self-reliant user. One of Foucault’s premises is that individuation—or the philosophy of individual difference—is one form of disciplinary mechanism. Fiske (1991) argues, following Foucault, that

... every body’s individual history, his or her accumulation of behaviors, is recorded and rated in school records and grade sheets, work records, credit ratings, criminal records, driving records—our society works on a highly elaborated system of surveying, and recording, ranking and individuating our everyday behaviors. Individuality of this sort is a top-down product: individuals are differentiated according to the demands of the system, and individuation becomes a disciplinary mechanism (p. 161, first emphasis in the original, second added).

While we might wish to argue with Foucault or Fiske, it is tempting to read the expressed need for self-reliance through this cultural studies perspective. If Foucault is correct that we in the West live, in general, in surveilled societies, then what function does self-reliance serve? Clearly, there are several possible answers to this question, but one is exceptionally appropriate. The self-reliant user—the library user who wishes to navigate resources with as little help as possible, as independently as possible—seeks a kind of privacy from the surveillance of librarian help.

Having found the relative anonymity of cyberspace and a virtual world, this self-reliant user now seeks the same independence and lack of surveillance in the text-based and digitized universe of information resources known as the library. Seeking and finding needed resources on one’s own is a form of resistance to the structure, discipline, regimentation, and organization of a library. It is a break with the systematized, bureaucratized, and restrictive universe of materials management, or a rebellion against the disciplinary restraining mechanisms of waiting for help, asking what must appear to be “dumb questions” (as one respondent, an undergraduate, called them), and then finding that there is little help after all in locating needed resources. Rather than assuming a subservient posture with respect to resources, the self-reliant user struggles as a form of opposition to what appears to be an unwieldy system of control, and refuses to comply with orderly (and what must sometimes appear as oppressive) processes for learning about collections, preferring rather an intransigent and slightly triumphant mapping of resources himself or herself. Such users eventually create cognitive and conceptual maps of where materials might be found, or likely places to
search for them. These users also appear to be willing to speculate about potential resources that might be available; and according to some of the interviewees, the speculation pays off more often than not.

9. New users and new space

It seems that what we are seeing here is not merely a self-reliant user, but, with the advent of multiple virtual realities, the creation of a new kind of user. This user resists traditional definitions of libraries as habitats regulated and policed by librarians. He or she, furthermore, is determined to prise out the secrets of collections and resources, insofar as possible, independently of assistance or the necessity of asking for help (which might not, even after questioning, prove valuable). This user comes with, or has acquired, the skills for piloting through the uncharted waters of cyberspace, and feels the physical world can be as readily navigated. In some ways, these users are library surfers; they gain mastery by doing, rather than asking, and prefer the independence and indeed, emancipation, that mapping out the collections by themselves brings.

More than this, however, these new users engage in what Berland (1991) calls the “production of space.” They create the space in which they wish to navigate, irrespective of the geographical boundaries of the tangible, physical space of the library. Frequently, they are focused on the resources, materials, and texts which they need, and care little about the resources that are not viewed as essential to their work. In short, they are respectful only of the boundaries of the habitus which they themselves create. This parallels to an eerie extent the self-reports of individuals learning to surf the Web by themselves. Exploration is interest-focused and self-guided. Individuals create individualized networks, linkages and nodes that are meaningful to themselves, without regard to the dictates of others.

10. Reprise

To circle back on the topic, qualitative research can be used to help us imagine new and fruitful “categories” of thinking about lived, human experience. Although we often say, in shorthand fashion, that categories “emerge” from the data, in fact, categories do not often “reside” in data, as that turn of phrase would have us believe. Categories arise in the interaction between data studying and researcher ordering; they are a product of the interaction effect between deep study of data and the researcher’s own cultural predelictions, definition of the problem, and previous experience. As a consequence, the categories mentioned, and those chosen for deeper analysis, are not categories which have some

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3 This was not always true. Several respondents mentioned they enjoyed cruising through collections and texts not necessarily associated with their own disciplines, seeing and enjoying discovering what resources were there when they might someday get to them. But many of the more senior interviewees claimed for themselves efficiency in locating their own disciplinary materials.
ontological status outside of the study. They were an interaction not just of researcher and data, but between multiple researchers, data, and previous research work in the arena of service quality. Consequently, the categories are first- and second-, and possibly third-order, removed from the concrete and material experiences of those interviewed.

Furthermore, libraries are a particular cultural experience. While they may appear “normal” to those involved in their daily routines, in fact, libraries, especially the libraries at large research institutions and installations, are artifacts of an idea of high culture that is millennia old. They therefore occupy a space in Western culture that is historic, traditional, and elitist. Their conservative mission, overlaid with bureaucratic and administrative procedures which are daunting to unskilled users, provides a formidable habitus for the uninitiated. More to the point, libraries are at the center of a nested design, in which the larger university provides an intellectual, social, and cultural surround. The university, at the next level of analysis, occupies a niche in the social ecology of research universities (and all colleges and universities more broadly), and each of those concentric circles nests within a wider culture marked by sub-cultures, high and low, with varying degrees of contact with the products of high culture.

Thus, re-reading and deconstructing these data through a cultural studies perspective are not a particularly strange pursuit. Libraries represent, to some extent, the intersection between economic and social class, between cultures and subcultures, and between the technologies of control and the possibilities for emancipation. Reading the categories through the lens of habitus, social control, the production of space, and the navigation of overlapping tangible and virtual realities helps to illuminate those aspects of libraries that remain untapped, uncaptured by user surveys, by service quality assessments, or other important, but incomplete, means of discovering how well libraries do what they are supposed to do vis-à-vis users.

The point of such an exploration is to engage other ideas in circulation, to see whether looking across disciplines might provide some insights into the data. What we are seeing is the intersecting axes of two emergent social and cultural creations. The first is a new kind of library—a textual and digital repository, which also serves (in a day of scarce resources and resource-sharing) as a nexus, a node, a linkage, between users and other possible sites and possibilities for information retrieval. The second cultural creation is a new kind of user: one who is self-reliant and who views library control of resources as an obstruction to the creation of his or her own cognitive skills, as a challenge to exploration, discovery, and search modes. Libraries are, for self-reliant users, an intricate and information-dense Dungeons and Dragons, full of danger, excitement, challenge, and conquest. New users are reasonably efficient, but they are also “reasonable adventurers,” preferring the lure of triumph and success to the subtle individuation, and therefore control, of the otherwise orderly world of materials management. The new user and the new library are hybrids, the first striving for texture and mastery, the latter attempting to achieve comprehensiveness and density. Both are a creation of, and at, the node where information explosion, culture, performance, cyberspace, habitus, privacy, and the social construction of self crosscut each other.

What are the implications of a cultural reading such as this one? That is the real question, for readings through different lenses are of no use if they seem to achieve nothing
worthwhile. There is one such use for this trans-disciplinary reading of qualitative findings. Both libraries and users are going to have to discover new ways of interacting with each other. Libraries will need to explore methods and modes of helping which edify the feelings that self-reliant users want, even as staff wait to teach those who ask new search modes and information sources. New strategies for access will have to be created; new users will need to feel that a library is a habitus that has important contributions to make beyond information retrieval for the campus intellectual community. Whether this happens as a function of user-friendly facilities, more laptop hookups, better designed furniture, or simply better signage, is not clear. Each campus, each research facility library, faces its own unique culture of access and denial. Only with in-depth, local, qualitative, “culture” studies can libraries know and understand what compels some to remain as far away from the library as possible, while others refrain from engaging library staff in their own search for proficiency and self-reliance.

Libraries may have to think about service in a different fashion. Service is not performed, as in getting one’s tires rotated; service is, rather, a performance—an intricate transaction between two persons who each assume roles and scripts, and who will either come to trust one another, or fail to do so. To ask whether libraries serve the needs of users is an important question, but it is not the whole question. As libraries literally “become” something very different, and as users have metamorphosed from penitents to self-reliant information surfers, the rules of engagement have changed. Service is not something dispensed; rather, it is enacted as an elaborate cultural ritual, the texture and fabric of which is changing in front of us. Service may now embody multiple overlays of meaning, many too dense for anything but an anthropological fieldwork study to uncover. Just what those multiple meanings might be have yet to be discovered—or even created.4

References


4 The referenced quotations in this document are not always parallel, because they are extracted from two different sources. The first source is the content analysis performed manually on the first several sets of interviews. The second source for quotations from respondents is coded to the ATLAS-ti™ database.


