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Necessity, Virtue, and "Research Skills"

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Have you noticed that when people wear vests, they often leave the bottom button unfastened? There's apparently a historical explanation. I've been told that centuries ago there was a particularly overweight English king who, unable to fasten the bottom button on his waistcoat, decided that he would "make of necessity a virtue" and decreed that all of his subjects should henceforth leave the bottom waistcoat button undone as a matter of fashion.

I've never been able to verify that story, but whether or not it's true it does illustrate a general human trait: our tendency to take behaviors or practices that are imposed on us by circumstance and eventually turn them (in our minds, anyway) into virtues.

There's not necessarily anything wrong with that tendency — kept within bounds, it can help us deal constructively with problems that can't be fixed. But sometimes things change, and the barriers that held us back in the past fall away. When that happens, we sometimes continue thinking and behaving as if the barriers still existed, and we may slide into an unhealthy veneration for behaviors that made sense when the barriers were there — adaptive behaviors can come to gain lives of their own as character-building "virtues."

In libraries, I think we need to reexamine some of what we've come to consider "virtuous" in our attitudes and behavior. Are these attributes and practices really virtues, or are they only ways of making necessary evils feel less onerous? And are they still necessary?

These thoughts came to mind during a discussion we were having in my academic library some time ago. Some of us were arguing about the importance of imparting research skills to students. My position (which will be unsurprising to anyone who has read this column before) was that we should focus more energy on making our resources easy to use and less energy on trying to make our patrons better users. Others felt that training students to be skillful and wise users of information resources is essential if we want to help them prepare for the future. One comment in particular made me stop and think. "Learning research skills," said one member of the library staff, "is one of the most important aspects of our students' education."

Why do we believe that? It certainly sounds reasonable — it maybe even sounds like something close to a professional core value – and few of us would disagree with that sentiment in conversation. But why?

I think part of the answer lies in the ambiguity of the concept of "research skills." If we mean the ability to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant information, or between the authoritative and the merely assertive, or between reliable sources and unreliable ones, then we're clearly talking about an essential part of education. But if we mean the ability to locate resources (prior to judging their worth) — that is, the ability to actually find books or articles on a topic, to search accurately for resources within a database, or to locate copies of documents that have been cited by others — then I think we confuse necessity with virtue when we assert the importance of that skill.

I think our profession may have experienced a kind of collective psychic damage as the result of our centuries-old dependence on paper and ink as an information matrix. Fifteen years into the electronic revolution, we've almost forgotten how terribly difficult it was to locate information when our only finding tools were card catalogs and printed indexes. Let's make no mistake here: that period was not the good old days — it was the dark ages, a time when people were kept ignorant of vital information because it could only be distributed to them in a slow, wasteful, and expensive manner, and once distributed it could only be used at the cost of significant effort, and even then it couldn't be effectively searched. No one loves printed books more than I, but loving books should not mean being willfully blind to what they do well and what they do badly. What they are very good for is extended, linear reading; what they are exceptionally bad for is distributing information, and for finding particular pieces of information. Searching for information in a printed book is like using a hammer to dig a hole: it can be done, but only with a huge investment of wasted effort.

I suspect that the "core value" of patron education has arisen in our profession largely because we've come to confuse the necessity of print-era research skills with the virtue of careful scholarship. For centuries, doing research has been a matter of digging a hole with a hammer. College was where most of us were trained in the proper use of hammers for digging, and many of us became quite good at it. Now we see the world around us (especially students) using those new-fangled shovels, and we're tempted to grumble about the hammer-wielding skills that no one bothers to acquire anymore. But why should we lament

the passing of skills that were needed primarily to adapt to a bad situation that no longer obtains? Putting information online doesn't completely eliminate the necessity of searching, or of acquiring basic research skills — but it does give us the opportunity to make many of those skills obsolete.

Do we lose something when we make it possible for our patrons to get what they need with little or no effort? That's frankly a frivolous question, one with a simple and obvious answer but the capacity to invoke almost limitless hand-wringing and time-wasting bloviation. The answer is yes, of course we lose something. No change comes without loss. The important and constructive question is whether we are left with a net loss, or with a net gain. Do our patrons get "spoiled" when we "spoon-feed" them the information they need? Maybe. But we should rejoice in spoiling our patrons in this way. The ability to make information easy to get is one in which we should revel and take pride. The less time our patrons have to spend in searching, the more time will be available to them for actual reading, and for thinking about what they read. Anyone who does not want people to spend less time searching and more time reading and thinking, I suggest, has no business in the library profession.

But there are other things that we do NOT lose, regardless of what some in our profession believe. Online access does not necessarily preclude browsing by subject; nor does it eliminate the element of serendipity from research. It's just as easy to come across an unanticipated discovery in a database search result as on a bookshelf. There may be titles that would have been discovered on a physical shelf that would not be discovered in an electronc search result, but the reverse is also true. And since a database contains far more information than any bookshelf could, the serendipity argument is really an argument in *favor* of more online searching, not against it — the likelihood of coming across unanticipated but good and relevant information sources in a database is far greater that the likelihood of doing so while browsing in a print collection.

Am I arguing that ease of access is the ultimate virtue in libraries? Not quite. Ease of access doesn't justify every conceivable expense, and of course there are online products that are necessary but notoriously difficult to use (our online catalogs perhaps chief among them). For now, it remains necessary to gain a certain level of skill in order to find the right information sources. But let's not confuse that necessity with virtue. 🐢

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