2014

Digital Conversations: Libraries, Learning, and Literacy

Paul Chilsen

Carthage College, pchilsen@carthage.edu

Todd Kelley

Carthage College, tkelley@carthage.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chilsen, Paul and Kelley, Todd (2014) "Digital Conversations: Libraries, Learning, and Literacy," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 23.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6666>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Digital Conversations — Libraries, Learning, and Literacy

Column Editors: **Paul Chilsen** (Chair and Associate Professor of Communication & Digital Media, Carthage College, and Director of the Rosebud Institute) <pchilsen@carthage.edu>

and **Todd Kelley** (Vice President for Library and Information Services, Carthage College) <tkelley@carthage.edu>

The world is a different place.

As commonplace as that statement might seem, its veracity feels clearer today than ever before. Almost everywhere we turn, the way we imagine, create, process, and...communicate has changed. As we have started to talk with each other about the changes in communication, the impacts of which we may only dimly perceive, there are a few core ideals that bubble to the surface. Like anyone involved in education, our goal is to help people learn and to do so effectively and efficiently. The population of the world continues to grow, and the relationship between people and their environment is getting ever more complex. The number of societal challenges and opportunities that present themselves also continues to grow in complexity as well. If higher education can do more to help address these challenges and can do it while containing costs, then everyone wins. There have rarely been such extraordinary opportunities to magnify learning and strengthen higher education through the effective use of communication technology. Librarians, technologists, and instructors have incredible opportunities, but realizing them will require us to think and work together in ways we never have before.

Because the world works in radically different ways than it did even 20 years ago, it is safe to say that we must transform the way we think about education. As the changes in our screen-based and digitized society speed up, and the global inhabitants of that culture shift with it, then predictably, education must respond to the call. If educators are to do this successfully, we will have to take stock of the resources we have to help make those changes. We must circle the wagons as it were, not to buffet the attack and cling to what we think we know, but rather to pool our resources and redouble our efforts so we can better lead the way on these new frontiers. Of course, this is happening, but it may need to happen faster and with a clearer sense of the greater goals and expanding possibilities.

Since libraries have always been cornerstones of learning, their role is also shifting. It seems to us that libraries and the librarians who run them are rife with possibilities in the push to repurpose and realign resources for learning in a digital and global communication system. And what better way to make this shift than to work locally — one on one with each other — to sort out what can be done, what is available, what is attainable, and what is best. That is what we are doing.

We are coming to the table together to try and parse out the various components of this expanding challenge: What can we do together to better position ourselves

and our organizations to meet, and in some ways get ahead of the demands of this exciting, global, at times both invigorating and enervating, but wholly essential and extraordinary shift in communication?

As we continue this dialectic together, we think it might be useful to share our experience — to publish our dialogue as it were — our explorations, frustrations, anticipations, and determinations. Given that this is a publication targeting all things library-related, and owing to our recent panel presentation at the **2013 Charleston Conference** on this very topic, [Link to slide deck: http://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/embed_code/28384147 (shortened code: <http://slidesha.re/1IAKkAF>).] it seems fitting to speak to the library issues first and lay out some of the issues from a library perspective.

Each generation has its challenges and its contributions to progress in library management and information science. Over the past twenty years, librarians have successfully repurposed library space as they have simultaneously helped create and adopt new forms of scholarly communication that do not require shelf space. However, American history scholar and University President **Edward Ayers** has recently reminded us (Ayers, 2013) that we have not yet uncovered the secret for broadly creating and disseminating digital scholarship. He (2013) states that “The articles and books that scholars produce today bear little mark of the digital age in which they are created. Thus the foundation of academic life — the scholarship on which everything else is built — remains surprisingly unaltered.” We believe that this situation is about to change!

First, the work of converting print material to network deliverable content is largely underway or complete. Many publishers and librarians now agree that the printed version of network deliverable content is the vestigial organ or the scholarly communication system. In many cases librarians have stopped maintaining print versions of content that are available in the network deliverable formats. Some digital immigrants, that is, people born or brought up before the widespread use of digital technology, may still object to eliminating the published print version of scholarly communication, but scholarly societies and associations continue to move forward and are dealing successfully with these objections (see **Kieft, R., K. Fitzpatrick, B. Nordin, and S. C. Wheatley**. “Scholarly Societies, Scholarly Publishing, and the New Information Ecology.” 2013 Charleston Conference Proceedings. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2014. Print.). At our library, the purchase policy was recently reset so that the digital

version of any work is the preferable version when both versions are available.

Second, and perhaps even more importantly, the social context for change is providing fertile ground for reconceiving how communication works in a network-connected world where open access, open source, and cloud-based services are broadly accepted and utilized. Digital natives are not going to be sanguine about a scholarly communication system that is based upon the limitations of print communication. “Today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors,” maintains **Marc Prensky**, a former teacher and author who coined the term “digital native.” “By the time students reach their early twenties, they have spent some 10,000 hours playing video games, on average, sent and received 200,000 email messages and instant messages, but have allotted just 5,000 hours to reading books” (Prensky, 2001).

It is apparent to us that **Prensky** is accurate in his assessment, but the implications for communication and specifically for the scholarly communication system are not as clear. This is where we can put our collective heads together, roll up our sleeves, and get to work in order to put it all together with the digital natives. Certainly the tweeting, texting, gaming, and video creating behaviors are indicative of certain skills and knowledge. More interesting, however, are the aspects of digital communication that reflect a larger purpose and implicit understandings about what can be done with the nascent digital communication system as it exists today. We observe the behavior of the digital natives, and may even participate ourselves, but do we understand the mindset and the unspoken assumptions of the digital natives?

Digital natives have an intuitive understanding of the information ecosystem. They see little difference between communication and information. Communication instantly becomes information because it can often be readily accessible to all. Digital natives use, contribute to, and repurpose information from broadly accepted and crowd-sourced venues. Wikipedia is not any more suspect than any other source of information. Digital natives select appropriate tools and formats for the impact desired. Their goal is to deliver and present their work in the most effective way possible. In the digital communication world, they have many choices. They understand that in some circumstances Youtube may present more advantages for reaching others than an officially sanctioned communication organ. They want to connect with like-minded people no matter where they are located. They put together new knowledge through synthesizing information and formats and through working with others over the network in a highly transparent and collaborative

continued on page 45

manner. They have an intuitive understanding of the audience because they understand that the digital generation will define communication going forward. In essence, they are already defining the future with their assumptions.

They want to have a worldwide impact, even if, and perhaps even because, their efforts are indigenous in terms of their location. They want to influence others with their ideas, but are realistic in the degree to which their communication will sway others, given that we are awash in a sea of information. They are open to alternative perspectives because their communication system is so relatively open and transparent. Given what we believe is true of the digital natives, how can those of us who are digital immigrants help them use their broad-minded purpose and understandings to more intentionally advance learning, scholarship, and society, while still being mindful of our obligations to quality and to protecting the permanence of the scholarly record? The time seems propitious to turn our professional attention to moving forward with scholarly communication in the digital age and to focus on nurturing digital scholarship by digital natives. Librarians and libraries have a significant role in this effort. Librarians have roles as instructors in helping natives understand the importance of understanding all aspects of scholarly communication, including the preservation of and access to information. The immutability of the printed record in a library continues to stand as both a symbol and a practical reminder of why the artifacts of print culture continue to be incredibly powerful. Creating a digital system that is trustworthy involves determining how openness and the process of transformation can co-exist happily with the immutability of the scholarly record.

Over the past several years we have noted how newer technologies are “baking in” the preservation of earlier versions of work so that access to previous versions is even easier than examining the cross section of an archeological dig. Transparency for the entire communication process can be enhanced given the flexibility of new technology tools. Those who use these tools to capitalize on the disposition of the digital natives should find fertile ground for capturing their enthusiasm. As space in libraries becomes available because maintaining print is less of a priority, the function of supporting digital scholarship becomes ever more important and even a bit easier. Providing support for the “consumption” of network deliverable scholarship is a function that libraries have supported for the past twenty years. How many libraries have established space and adequate support for the creation of digital scholarship?

We note that as early as 1995 some research libraries¹ created space in the library and established positions to support efforts for creating digital scholarship. Other libraries established space and support for teaching and learning, with a major focus on helping digital immigrants adjust to the possibilities of e-learning

Figure 1 — Communication Convergence

that technology adoption makes conceivable. Other major libraries have actually created a publishing operation or moved an existing one under their administrative control.

Smaller libraries, such as those at leading liberal arts colleges, have begun to bring together existing information technology support for teaching and learning with librarians' interests in digital scholarly communication. The fusion of technology for learning with library proclivities for process and quality is an interesting combination that could potentially add tremendous value to the educational experience that is offered to students. Using digital media to collaboratively learn, create work products, and demonstrate learning is the best way to engage digital natives in active learning along the lines of what they increasingly expect. With their interest in and experience with media, digital natives are likely to produce some powerful and effective knowledge products.

What type of support systems are needed for these opportunities?

- **Physical and virtual “space” and technologies for supporting digital communication.**

What types of space and support might libraries provide for students and faculty when it comes to digital communication projects? At our library we are grappling with the opportunities presented by thousands of newly available square feet that opened up when print material was moved off site or deaccessioned. One idea that we are particularly interested in is creating a digital communication center where experts and novices can come together to create digital work, whether it is to meet class requirements, promote an idea or organization, support research and teaching, or add to the scholarly record.

- **Expert consulting resources for digital communication and media creation.**

Libraries will require more expertise with digital media as they work to

support students and faculty in creating and using media as part of their work. Librarians and others with expertise in video, animation, audio, images, games, and other types of media will be in greater demand.

- **Consultation support for directing faculty and students to “new digital publishing” opportunities.**

There are many new start-up companies that are eager to engage authors in new digital publishing ventures. In addition, some existing publishers, including not-for-profits, are looking for authors who are ready to integrate visual media or interactivity into their work. At our College we recently collaborated with faculty and students who specialize in children's literature and hosted a conference for next generation digital publishers of this genre. Many publishers participated and the conference sold out. Many of those who attended were school teachers, and they confirmed that elementary and high school students expect and are looking for digital works.

Librarians who work for a broad and open vision of scholarly communication that belongs to everyone will serve the next generation of students as well as society. Collaborative projects will help lead the way. The nascent realignment of subsystems for scholarly communication is a potentially productive development in the history of higher education. How can we learn from the past to make sure that the broad interests of society today and future generations are well served by academic librarians and their libraries?

The interests of librarians are naturally aligned with those of digital natives. Working to support the digital natives may mean refocusing and redirecting efforts toward a larger goal, a new generation of learner scholars, and a new set of priorities. We may need to refrain from supporting every source of network deliverable content in order to create support for

continued on page 46

faculty and students who are interested in creating digital scholarship, whether they are local or part of a broader effort. For example, providing support to associations and societies that are reorganizing and reframing their efforts for support of digital communication by digital natives is a positive way forward. The nascent digital humanities movement is an exciting part of this effort.

If not-for-profit higher education can demonstrate that it has the capability to reorganize, reframe, and re-establish the creation, access to, and use of knowledge for the continued benefit of all, the advantages will accrue to the organizations who actively participate and to non-profit higher education more broadly. Librarians and libraries are in a position to help lead this effort. Change will happen with librarian leadership or without it. We suggest that a focus on aligning goals and resources with the expertise, needs, and expectations of digital natives is critical for success. Everything else is open for discussion! In subsequent articles, we will further the conversation, balancing as many germane viewpoints as we can to reach a clearer and better vision of what to start doing now. That is our hope — to engage in a discussion, and with that discussion, to arrive at some useful conclusions about what to do. Although it may often seem so in an academic setting, for us this is no Sisyphean task. The intent is to accomplish steps towards real change.

References

Ayers, E. (2013). Does Digital Scholarship Have a Future. *Educause Review*, Vol 48, 4. Retrieved from: <http://www.educause.edu/ero/article/does-digital-scholarship-have-future>.

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. *On the Horizon* (MCB University Press) Vol. 9 No. 5. Retrieved from: <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>. 🐼

Endnotes

1. The second author (Kelley) created such a unit called *The Digital Knowledge Center* within the **Milton S. Eisenhower Library** at **The Johns Hopkins University** in 1995. A number of university libraries and some college libraries have followed suit.

Oregon Trails — You Are What You Read

Column Editor: **Thomas W. Leonhardt** (Retired, Eugene, OR 97404)
<oskibear70@gmail.com>

The most valuable item on my desk is a 3" x 5" loose-leaf notebook that I have carried around for more than fifty years. It is a record of all of the books that I have read from 1962 to the present, a record of my intellectual development, changing needs and interests, and books that have nurtured me through impressions and re-readings.

I have long known that one's memory is not to be trusted and when I've remembered first running across an author or a particular book, I have been off by several years more than once. I had long thought that the first **Saul Bellow** I ever read was *The Adventures of Augie March*, but it was *Seize the Day* followed by *Henderson the Rain King* and then *Augie March*.

The book has taken a beating over the years, and many of the punch holes have re-inforcements to keep them in place. The early pages contain two lines per entry with the title on the first line and the date finished, author, and number of pages on line two. In 1965 I changed the format to one line: date, title, author. I was a soldier in Germany then, a trumpet player in the 84th U.S. Army Band, and interested in furthering my education through reading and writing short reviews (book reports) in another 3"x5" loose-leaf notebook of each book that I read. That didn't last long, but the few that I wrote survive and make me wish that I'd written more, that I had continued the exercise. But that last year in the Army became a very busy year for me, and I gradually stopped writing about what I read.

The first book that I read in 1963 earned a C- at **Dartmouth**, where I stayed for my last week as a civilian. I was crashing in the room of a friend from high school who shared the space with a roommate. I had time on my hands. My friend's roommate did not, so I wrote a paper on *The Old Order* by **Katherine Anne Porter**. I don't remember if he paid me or not, and I don't remember if having read *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* about three weeks earlier had any bearing on the paper or the grade. If the roommate was happy with the C, how could a college dropout complain?

Of the thirty-two books that I read in 1962, I managed only eight while in college that winter semester, and among them was the first of four **Steinbeck** books, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, a gift from another high school friend who remembered both my birthday and how much I admired **John Steinbeck** while still in high school. That summer, I also read *The Log From the*

Sea of Cortez and *Cup of Gold*, a serendipitous purchase while in the Ft. Lewis PX. I also owned a copy of *The Portable Steinbeck* and so, in the year in which he won the **Nobel Prize for Literature**, without realizing it, I had the beginnings of my first author collection that has grown to more than 60 items.

Before I left **Chapel Hill** in spring 1962, I bought a second-hand **Modern Library** edition of *Casuals of the Sea* by **William McFee**. I bought the book not because it cost only a quarter, but on the basis of a quote included in a letter from another high school friend.

"Be master of yourself. The world is not an oyster to be opened but a quicksand to be passed. If you have wings you can fly over it, if not you may — yes, yes, I am coming now, my dear! — you may quite possibly be sucked in."

The wise man speaking to our hero — of late hooked on reading, is a second-hand bookseller who is being drawn away from his first love, books and their wisdom, by his wife. I was overpowered by the book, in part a tale of sea-faring men and their families.

I now own 18 **McFee** books including four editions of *Casuals of the Sea*. One is an Armed Services Edition published especially for members of the **United States Armed Services** during World War II.

When I first read that book, it was only to get to the root of the passage cited above. I am sure that I did not read the introduction written by **Christopher Morley**. The name would have meant nothing to me, and why waste time on an introduction when the entire book was waiting? But in 1975, I discovered *Parnassus on Wheels*, perhaps **Morley's** most famous and popular book, although *Kitty Foyle* probably earned him more money because it was not only a bestseller (501,000 copies sold including reprints) in 1939-1940, it was made into a popular film starring **Ginger Rogers** in 1940. One of my copies of *Kitty Foyle* is an Armed Services Edition.

Kitty was a modern, liberated woman before her time, but Roger Mifflin, who peddled books from a covered wagon, is my hero. He once refused to sell a book to a man because he wasn't ready for it yet. But he sold him something to read to bring him up to speed. A good bookseller is also a reader's advisor.

But I digress. I was going to relate how this unknown writer of introductions (one of **Morley's** specialties in touting books of high quality) became one of my favorite writers over the years and I advanced from finding reading copies to collecting first editions and related **Morley** items. My **Morley** collection now runs to about 90 items, none of which is exceedingly rare, but their presence comforts me. I'll continue to read him and appreciate his often whimsical outlook on life, one of

continued on page 47