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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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In the November 2007 issue of ATG, reviewer Burton Callicott explored a few titles germane to the research needs of the “Net Generation,” born between 1980 and 1995. No matter what you call this population — N Gens, Generation Y, Millennials, Gen — members of this group are adept with computers, text messaging, MP3 players, and all sorts of gadgets and technology: For many librarians, their ability to quickly search the Internet, as well as their tendency to jump straight to Google, can be challenging. A wealth of information regarding this generation and their research habits, needs, and expectations can be found in Susan Gibbons’ The Academic Library and the Net Gen Student. Happy reading, everyone! — DV

You might have read about Susan Gibbons in Library Journal or The Chronicle of Higher Education; she is a mover and shaker who connects with and learns about all of those tied to the academic library faculty, students, and librarians. Working with anthropologist Nancy Fried Foster a few years ago, she spearheaded an investigation of how University of Rochester faculty use the library. Recently, the team examined students’ paper-writing processes using anthropological research methods; the results of this project provided groundwork for The Academic Library and the Net Gen Student: Making the Connections. In her book, Gibbons explores the ways that academic libraries can meet students’ needs a propos technology. She asserts that there is a “real, vibrant future for academic libraries,” but she cautions that it “requires a realignment of the services, collections, and resources of academic libraries with the academic needs of undergraduate students” (xv). She discusses the framework of libraries with respect to their missions; the basic ideas about and characteristics of the Net Generation; how this generation uses different kinds of technology and why; and, perhaps most importantly, what academic libraries can do to ensure that they are continually in step with their students while fulfilling their mission to be the best in the world at serving the unique teaching, learning, and research needs of their home academic institutions by actively participating in the creation, transmission, and dissemination of knowledge (90).

In chapter one, “The Mission of an Academic Library,” Gibbons offers a thought-provoking portrait of the library mission, stating that it should “follow the needs of its patrons, even if it means changing some of the library’s core functions and services” (xxv). Gibbons draws on ideas from Clayton Christensen, author of Innovator’s Dilemma, regarding disruptive technologies. She creates the analogy that digital photography is to film photography as ATM’s are to bank tellers. In the library world, this analogy can be extended to reason that the Internet can be seen as a disruptive technology to the academic library. Think of the number of services that are built on the Internet: Google Answers, ChaCha, Yahoo! Answers, Amazon.com, and Google Scholar. Students use these services as alternatives to information resources bearing the “library brand.” When discussing academic libraries’ mission, Gibbons also borrows Jim Collins’ "hedgehog concept" from Good to Great. This concept allows libraries to explore their potential niches in the academic community and funnel activities into realizing their promise. Finally, Gibbons cites The Social Life of Information, by Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, to articulate the differences between information vs. knowledge. Knowledge, higher on the cognitive ladder than information, requires human interaction, and librarians are ripe for the part. Librarians also serve as translators between faculty steeped in the traditions of their discipline and students who are in the infancy of their disciplinary grounding. In order to be that human link and to translate between faculty and students, we must KNOW our students — we must do everything we can to understand the Net Generation.

Gibbons offers a solid overview of the different generations in American society, focusing (of course) on the Net Generation, in chapter two. Based on the prediction formulas of William Strauss and Neil Howe, authors of Millennials Rising, Net Gener “will rebel against Generation X [pessimistic and selfish] styles and attitudes, correct for Baby Boomer excesses, and fill the [hero] role vacated by the G.I. [Generation]” (13). It is in this discussion of the Net Gen that Gibbons introduces the two-year study of undergraduate students that she and Foster lead at the University of Rochester libraries. Through her own observations and from others’ writing, she looks at the gap between the Net Gen — digital natives — and other generations — digital immigrants. Gibbons refers to three fundamental differences that make up this gap: (1) The older generations are uneasy about the new technology—which kids are embracing; (2) older generations tend to be uneasy about new media—which are coming into the heart of youth culture; and (3) the digital revolution, unlike previous ones, is not controlled by only adults (18).

Interestingly, Gibbons writes, students feel only moderately comfortable with online library resources. Furthermore, she states that students want technology to be present in their academic pursuits, but mainly for the purposes of convenience, course activity management, and time management — students do not necessarily see the pedagogical benefits and instructive potential of technology.

The next four chapters focus on the use of technology and the opportunities for change. Chapter three, “Web 2.0, Tagging, and Social Bookmarking,” offers a solid overview of the possibilities that exist to better serve our Net Gen patrons. Gibbons’ ideas about said genres viewed through a library-focused lens are stirring. One can’t help but to think of all the exciting possibilities that exist to better serve our Net Gen patrons.

In her concluding chapter, Gibbons reassures readers that adaptation to new technologies’ rate of change is not only a challenge for the academic library; rather, all aspects of the university — from the adoption of course management systems to in-class pedagogies — are slow to change, while traditional students make up “one of the most adaptive, flexible segments of the American population” (92). She proposes a handful of suggestions for libraries and librarians wanting to step up and adapt to such a dynamic generation.

Scads of books and articles delve into the characteristics of Millennials, this new generation of technologically savvy young adults; however, few sources provide such in-depth coverage of this generation and their library behaviors. The Academic Library and the Net Gen Student is a natural follow-up to Frances Jacobson Harris’ Found It on the Internet: Coming of Age Online. Gibbon’s book is a must-read for those working in an academic library that serves the 18- to 24-year-old demographic, especially public service professionals and library administrators. I can only hope that a second edition is on the way, complete with unforeseen technologies and the full report of Gibbons’ and Foster’s anthropological study of the library habits of undergraduates at the University of Rochester.