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For the Love of Libraries: A Student Eye View

■ Charlotte Haines Lyon

As a child, I used to live in the library every afternoon after school, until my dad could collect me on his way home from work. With thanks to the librarians' friendly pointers, I learned how to embalm bodies, wrestle crocodiles, love Roget's Thesaurus as well as become a detective along with Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. As an adult, I pride myself in having more library cards than loyalty cards in my purse, including the British Library, several public libraries and of course my university library.

York St John has a modern library with large windows, bean bags, sofas, group work areas, banks of computers and liberal drink and food policies. It is somewhat different to the oak-panelled philosophy library I studied in for my Masters and at times I hanker after a small studious area with beautiful lighting. Whilst the chat and food might be an anathema for

traditionalists, it is the 24/7 accessibility of many library resources, namely journals and ebooks that have had the most impact on my work and attitude.

With such accessibility, about 70% of my "library work" is carried out at home. I am developing an expectation to be able to access any document at my desk at 2am. Not only does this lead to impatience but it is also difficult to draw boundaries with regard to just how many articles I need to read for my research. During the halcyon days of my Masters, there was a very obvious limit: the number of journals on the shelf, and possibly those at the neighbouring university. Now I find myself wondering why I can't access that ebook or journal that is stocked by a university in Minnesota. I then panic that my PhD examiners will expect me to have read every document on the planet.

At the other end of the spectrum is my local public library which has been sorely ravaged by cuts and is now serving a wider geographical area with fewer staff and hours. I have not yet worked out how to use ebooks there. This is a deliberate attempt at a slower pace of reading. There are few academic books, so this library is for my leisure. Furthermore I want to encourage my daughters' enjoyment of books and discovery of surprise stories on the shelves.

In contrast, my university library is privileged as it continues to extend hours in response to demand, to buy books, and actively to engage with students on the "feedback wall". Despite the aforementioned accessibility of ebooks and journals, I still value finding "real books" on the shelves and the synergy of accidental discoveries next to my target tome. Most important however is the ability to place sticky notes throughout the book that I am currently reading.

Sticky notes are central to my work, and I cannot trust the various electronic versions of note-making and highlighting that different platforms

allow. This is partly because the myriad of platforms leaves too many places for notes to be stored and retrieved from. My sticky notes can be organised centrally and in a place that does not depend on future licensing issues.

There seems to be an obsession about the different platforms and facilities that offer ebooks and journals. However I am simply interested in the ability to access a particular text, the platform is fairly irrelevant. DawsonEra is the only platform I can name, partly because it looks full of promise, but mainly because I have faced its "locked out" screen too many times. The recent ability to download books is a huge improvement, but it would be much better if we could have access for a week rather than two days. Maybe libraries and ebook providers need to consider the practicalities of reading ebooks when looking after young children.

My university library may not be the largest, but the interlibrary loan service is excellent, I also regularly use the Boston Spa British Library. However I would argue that our subject librarians are our most important resource for doctoral students. From the initial induction tutorials to one to one sessions on copyright, Endnote and most intriguingly "content drift" when a key government document had disappeared; these have been a life-line. My subject librarian has been able to deal with my specific needs as a mature student returning to education after many years and I will be forever grateful. Furthermore our subject librarians often have conversations with us about the political issues surrounding libraries, journals, open access etc, which I think is important for researchers. Libraries can be as large and as full of physical and electronic resources as possible but it is the staff that make them.

About the Author:

Charlotte is a PhD Student, researching the use of Community Philosophy as a tool for Critical Parental Engagement in a Primary School.

