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LIBR 200 Discussion Post – Post-Modernism

The latest changes

We all know that change is constant and expected. That the librarian's role changes over time is not new, and the need to change now from an actor in a modernist institution to postmodernist one should be, and is being, embraced. We, like our users, are a product of this postmodernist culture. Our role is a complex reaction to our time and place, a combination of what we do and don't do, how we are perceived and how we want to be perceived. Libraries and librarians are typically closely associated with a physical structure and with physical media. We need to transition to a role where libraries are recognized as digital institutions that help provide access to knowledge in a way that is complementary to what can be found on the Internet through search engines.

The librarian's role as an instructor, as described by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2000), or as a coach, as Koh (2003) mentions, in developing information literacy among students can be seen as a connection between modernism and postmodernism. I tend to see the information literacy skills—framing questions, evaluating, analyzing, synthesizing—as modernist methods applied to a postmodern world of information abundance. Teaching students how to be critical evaluators of information from any source while guiding them in how to turn this information into knowledge is a wonderful role for the librarian. It is also a very vital role if, as noted by Wood (2004) in our last reading assignment, many students make it to college with only a vague understanding of how and why to cite sources—a key tenant of information literacy.

However, if postmodernism is also about the “blurring of boundaries” (Bodi & Maier-O’Shea, 2005, p. 144) between high and low, accepted and questionable, scholarly and popular, then some recognition of the validity of non-traditional/non-authoritative sources has to be accepted—as long as the sources are recognized as such by students. I’m not talking about sources that are factually incorrect; I’m talking about sources that provide new and contradictory interpretations and non-traditional perspectives. And perhaps this is also a role for the postmodern librarian, to point out the differences between these types of sources so that students know how to add this information into their body of knowledge. If we view this idea in light of Greene’s (2003) article, it seems that characterizing certain sources as well as users as somehow not worthwhile can actually be seen as biased and not in keeping with the postmodern zeitgeist. Equally, per Greene, archivists (and by extension librarians) must be aware of their own role in influencing a collection or a user; they are not neutral, though they altruistically aspire to be.

Another emphasis of postmodernism is a focus on and, certainly through social media, an interaction with users. All four readings from this week include this sentiment. Bodi and Maier-O’Shea said it succinctly and forcefully: “we are in a user-centered rather than collection-centered world, and the library’s mission is to customize information for its users” (2005, p. 145). In Bodi and Maier-O’Shea’s case, users are both faculty and students. Their efforts involve exploding previously accepted collection and budget categories to focus on the knowledge needed for learning outcomes and course goals. Listening to users needs to be a continuous activity, especially with how quickly technology and user preferences are changing these days.

Finally, one lesson learned from listening to users is the need to create “an interface as seemingly easy to use as an Internet search engine” (Koh, 2003, p. 185). Such an interface is product of and reinforces a library’s digital presence. Following best practices established by successful businesses, like Google, seems appropriate. If libraries want to maintain their place in society, they need a strong digital presence, ideally to a point where the library is considered equally with Google in education, information and entertainment searches. Importantly, this digital presence should not take priority over the in-person services, events and analogue collections housed in the physical library building. Libraries as community centers and knowledge centers are important in serving many segments of the population who may not be able or want to access services online.

References

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