Get out of the library

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As 'the anthropologist in the stacks', I have gotten used to questions from librarians about students and faculty. They are familiar, and occasionally vexing, questions: "What do they think?" "How do they know?" "How do we know?" and "Do they care about libraries at all?" I am also asked "Where are the students?" "Where are the faculty?" "Where is the work?" and "Why am I here?" These questions and many others are often framed around concerns about value – how do we demonstrate, argue for, prove the value of libraries? And of course this need to 'prove value' is often in response to external drivers or politics.

But I am an anthropologist, and it's my role not to always answer the specific questions; reframing, pulling back and looking at the wider, more holistic view helps illuminate larger contexts. Here I want to make one broad argument, with two related parts. Fundamentally, I want librarians to get out of their libraries. Libraries as buildings, as institutions, and centres of particular sets of expertise, need to be understood as a part of a larger whole. And librarians need to work with people who are not in or of libraries, to be able to truly engage with and tackle the challenges inherent in academia.

The reality is some academic work does happen in the library. In the building, in the library systems, among the people working in the library. But as is the case with the university as a whole, the library, its people, its digital and physical places, and its resources exist within a much larger world, one of the open web, of places and people and resources the institution has no control over (think SciHub, think Research Gate, think studying in a local cafe). The resources libraries provide aren't the entirety of the resources that their students and faculty use. The spaces libraries provide aren't the only ones their students occupy.

Limiting the work of the library to the building, or the organisational structures of the library, is a problem. Institutions become a smaller part of the context as the individuals grow in their network. The anthropological work I do in libraries and higher education also requires that we recognise how unimportant the library can be in the big scheme of things for our students and faculty. We need to ground our sense of the value of our work, of the values we express in that work, with a sense of perspective. We are not and cannot be all things, everything, or even the most important thing to people who need us.

My argument is for holism, and not reducing the work we do (or that our students or faculty do) to a list of tasks, or string of numbers. We need to ask questions like "What is the entire picture of what the people here do?" "What does it mean to 'do Higher Education'?" "How is that communicated?" "How is that performed?" "How is that made manifest in our physical environments?" and "What is anyone's given role?"

When librarians ask about elusive "invisible users", those "people we know use library stuff, but never see", I think some reasons that they feel their users are invisible is because they are bounded by library spaces, digital and physical. If people in libraries cannot see their users it's possible it's because they are not themselves in the right places. Ethnography, a way of seeing, can allow libraries to witness what people are doing, and where, and then begin to understand why. We need to dispense with the concern for 'users'. As part of the civic structures of society, as part of education and information systems in the wider world, libraries have a responsibility to people whether they are in our buildings and systems, or not. Libraries need to spend more time with projects that get us out of the library, out of our institutions, out of our comfort zones, and into the lives and priorities of the people in our communities. In a time when media and information literacies are at the forefront of people's minds, it should be the goal of every library to play a part in the wider community.

The cognitive maps I have been collecting for the last few years as part of various projects, and continue to use to think with, reveal both the messiness of academic practice and also how unbounded people and practices are by institutions and their proprietary spaces (digital and physical). Your 'users' don't care about your institutional boundaries. Digital tools and places have made it so they don't have to care as much, either. So, human-centred libraries need to start in places that are not libraries. Get out of the library. The people and the work you need to be concerned with are not always in the library, and you should not be either.

Likewise, the search for solutions to confounding things about libraries – precarious funding, lack of prestige, disconnection (or feelings of disconnect) from scholarly processes (research, publishing, teaching and learning) – cannot come from conversations with more libraries. Or, they cannot, should not come solely come from conversations within and between libraries. Outside collaboration and partnerships are where the things that would not have occurred to us previously can happen. This too is an anthropological approach, one that values the experiences and expertise of others precisely because they are not ours, and our imagination is therefore limited.

These partnerships can expand not just the available expertise that we can bring to confronting the challenges and seizing opportunities, but can give us access to different perspectives on academia, on practice, on community that we sorely need. Engaging in more and varied qualitative approaches to our communities, and working relationships with a variety of people outside of libraries might also help prevent those moments where libraries and librarians write about things that are new to them as if they are new altogether. 'New to you' is great, but treating new to you as 'unheard of' ignores pre-existing communities of experts. We do not need to become experts in all of the things. We need, rather, to reach out to experts who are already there, make them part of our networks, and strengthen the scope and impact of our work via these new connections.

Ethnography and anthropological approaches are crucial to institutions who want to be plugged into the people who constitute their community. They can also be the antidote to the metrics and analytics that are often used to justify interventions without understanding the context in higher education as a whole, not just libraries. Via anthropological techniques and perspectives, libraries can get closer to deeper understanding, representing and analysing, and further away from the surfaces of 'assessment' or 'evaluation'. Ethnography centres institutional priorities around the people, not the systems that institutions use. Ethnographic approaches are in and of themselves evidence of care for our community, and are a way of building relationships, of signaling our values and intentions, and the interests of the communities in which we are embedded as academic libraries.

The first step to connecting, engagement with, and understanding of our communities takes us outside of the library door.

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