

It's a Challenge

As we work with schools and public libraries to design learning experiences and environments, we're often dealt with the challenge of how to make libraries relevant to today's young people. Our technique is to take a step back and consider the larger picture: consider larger trends in learning and society as a whole. By focusing on these, we can help libraries achieve greater relevance on a holistic, community-based scale. The following discussion outlines powerful trends that inform our work and offer ideas as to how a library can respond to the trajectory of the 21st century.

Trends of Our Time

Society is undergoing a paradigm shift moving from passivity to activity. Technology has opened up opportunities for participation and assembly at an unprecedented scale. In many ways, it is the era of renewed democratic activism. All ages, all demographics, all nations are empowered to move away from responding to top-down processes and absorbing information. Now millions around the world are starting their own movements and experimenting with methods to make their community a better place. As a result, we see a global culture powered by social media rather than diplomatic efforts arise. We see nations like Egypt and Tunisia reconsider their form of governance. And, we see teachers and professors step down from their podium and place students at the helm of their own learning.

It is time for libraries to consider how to better serve this shift, appeal to younger generations, and stay agile in a time of rapid change. What does this look like on the institutional level? What is the modern public library?

To prove relevant to our hyper-connected participatory world, a library must strive to embody current trends, not just house materials about them. While the

What If? Exploring How Libraries Can Embody Trends of the Twenty-First Century

By Sarah C. Malin

fundamental mission of a library will stay the same, its approach and methods must evolve to incorporate trends related to participation and connection.

Keep in mind that a library encompasses three realms: education, social, and civic. How can a library be a better educational institution when society is shifting its understanding of learning from knowledge consumption to learning production? How can a library be a better social institution

when our world is becoming increasingly collaborative and interconnected? How can a library be a better civic institution when participation is available to all? These are the questions we're having fun considering.

Library as an Educational Institution

For decades the library has stood as a center of knowledge, supporting the

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Driving Questions to Define the Twenty-First Century Library

- How can a library remain relevant in a hyper-connected, participatory world? And how can it embody these changes rather than simply house them?
- What if the library was a physical form of the Internet?
- How can the library better facilitate learning from peers and mentors in addition to resources?
- How can the library better leverage its position as a "third space"?
- What if the library was a catalyst for civic development and renewal?

public's pursuits of lifelong learning. It houses a wealth of resources: a catalog of facts and stories that string together generations of experts and authorities. A visitor can browse the stacks and tangibly see the progression of our society. Libraries are viscerally connected to history.

But how can a library better reflect the paradigm shift to active learning? What if we shift from an emphasis on browsing resources to an emphasis on creating with resources? Learning requires the personalization of information. We each digest what we come across and weave it together to form our own ideas. Without this process and form of engagement, the information will not sink in. What if visitors added their materials to the shelves? Imagine the library becoming a gallery that celebrates the artifacts of current learning by customers alongside the findings of established experts. Visitors are empowered to put their own mark on fact and take their own place on the shelves.

As libraries strengthen their digital media expertise to keep up with technological trends, their collections become more accessible and participatory

for young generations. The MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Initiative, which supports Chicago's YOUmedia program, highlights how digital media can foster intellectual curiosity in teens and offer a medium for youth to personalize their library. Media production is fun for teens, involving personal expression, and an activity to share with others. It comes naturally as youth lead lives thoroughly embedded with digital tools. The library can provide resources and materials to work with as well as a public venue for showcasing the results. Libraries will benefit with programs like YOUmedia that combine youth empowerment with leading approaches to learning that integrate modern technology.

Consider the library as a physical form of the Internet: an open-source platform of resources and information. Reputable sources are interspersed with entries by your neighbors. A host of mediums are displayed including graphics, music, objects, film, and radio. Wise resource navigation, through these varying mediums, is a crucial skill of the twenty-first century, and libraries are excellently positioned to be a living laboratory for that—experientially as well as digitally. Librarians can design physical paths that would model and teach how to wade through these layers of information.

Library as a Social Institution

The library also serves as a crossroads and gathering place for community members. The rise of social media and an emphasis on collaboration in the professional and educational worlds has reinvigorated the social animal in all of us. Society has rediscovered the value of capitalizing on every brain and combining ideas to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. While virtual opportunities for this abound, we need physical places as well.

The library can be an oratory center as well as a literary one. Visitors can learn

from interacting with fellow community members, experiencing a more in-depth and personal encounter with information through live recounting of events and personalized explanations. Chicago and Toronto libraries offer programs that harness this social capital. The Toronto Public Library hosts a "Human Library" where visitors can check out "human books" and hear life stories. This program serves as another wonderful example of the breadth of informational sources beyond books that can be made available.

MacArthur Digital Media and Learning research findings highlight the importance of blending socializing with learning. HOMAGO (Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out) represents three distinct types of interest-driven activities and emphasizes designing for collaborative activity, peer learning, and mentoring relationships. Society no longer defines learning as something that happens alone in a carrel.

The library can also leverage its position as a third space: an alternative to home and work or school. Visitors to the library are able to act in ways that are restricted in other types of prescriptive environments. In the library, third space learning can happen at one's own pace and can follow one's own interests. It also means interaction and relationships can evolve organically between library staff and customers and between customers and customers. And, especially important for youth, it allows an individual to experiment with and negotiate one's identity. At the San Francisco Public Library, we found that the main branch offered an anonymous place for youth, distant from their neighborhood and those they know. This anonymity allowed teens to act in ways they might not at home, without ridicule or criticism. As high school becomes increasingly laden with responsibilities, consequences, and commitments, there is little opportunity to experiment without having to commit. The public library can provide an experience outside of what teens find in their high school hallways and classrooms.

Sherry Turkle, a psychologist at MIT, argues in her book *Alone Together* that virtual realms like Second Life and Facebook provide the invaluable and rare third space for teens to try out different personalities. What if the library could provide a similar space, but in the physical realm? What if it could bridge the virtual realm with the physical realm's first and second spaces, transitioning teens into their developed, physical selves? As our society grapples to make sense of the Internet and understand its consequences, the library is interestingly positioned to learn from the needs of customers over the centuries.

Library as a Civic Institution

And so, how can the library harness a learning community's momentum and activate its members to improve their

surroundings? How can the library be a civic catalyst? This has been a central goal for the San Francisco Public Library as it reconsiders its teen program. San Francisco has a long history of social activism and collective consciousness. Its programs reflect this with Green Stacks that provides resources for living greenly and a social worker in residence, the first and only full-time social worker dedicated to a San Francisco library. As they design their teen learning lab, they consider themselves to be a powerful aggregator of knowledge, relationships, and public sector programming. Their branches will be nodes in a web of learning that spreads across the entire city. And, they will define teens as civic actors who will benefit from and, most importantly, add to this web.

Trends of the twenty-first century change the library's point of view. Instead

of asking, "What will your library do?" ask, "What can your users do?" Powered by that perspective and integrated into a rich, activated community, your institution can go far. **YALS**

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