

Chapter LX

Information Commons and Web 2.0 Technologies: Creating Rhetorical Situations and Enacting Habermasian Ideals in the Academic Library

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ABSTRACT

This chapter delves into the transformation of academic libraries in response to two main elements: Information Commons and Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs and wikis. This transformation carries immense pedagogical significance for academic libraries by asserting a stronger presence of information literacy within the university curriculum. Traditional concepts of space, both virtual and physical, are also challenged by the inclusion of Information Commons and Web 2.0 technologies within academic libraries. Ultimately, what is revolutionized by these additions is the understanding of communication and pedagogy on the university campus.

INTRODUCTION

Language is the definitive foundation that supports all human activity and makes it meaningful. Throughout history, mankind has consistently participated in the production of language and language artifacts to communicate his most intimate experiences—religion, love, knowledge, and so forth. These productions of language have most often been produced with the understanding

that they will be shared—that is, there is typically an audience in mind for these productions. This audience will, most likely, also produce a response to the linguistic artifact it experiences. This process is the basic process of existence for man. Thus, language and ultimately the construction of meaning are inherently social acts, not truly possible without the participation of two or more people. Mikhail Bakhtin (1929), the father of modern rhetoric, makes this assertion when he

claims, “In point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee” (p. 1215). Here, Bakhtin demonstrates the dynamic nature of language and meaning. Learning, then, is also inherently social, active, and dynamic because learning is language-based. Yet our places of learning have traditionally been the antithesis of these three elements.

However, within the last 30 or 40 years, pedagogical practice on university campuses has shifted to accommodate the theory of the social construction of knowledge. There is an increased emphasis on group work, both in the assignments given to students and to teachers-in-training, and both on the higher education and secondary levels, who are being trained to plan and coordinate group work within their own classrooms. Although many classrooms and teachers have caught on to the importance of how learning actually happens and the centrality of the social construction of knowledge within that process, other spaces of learning, such as the academic library, are just now—within the last 10 years or so—starting to embrace the ideals of dynamic and communicative learning. Although the image of the shing librarian is still firmly embedded in the popular imagination, it is not difficult to believe that this well-worn stereotype will soon disappear with the radical transformation of library technologies, space, and policies. The construction of Information Commons and the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) technologies such as blogs and wikis within libraries all point to the understanding that language, meaning making and learning are social acts and that they are best carried out in spaces and channels that accommodate and encourage their social nature.

BACKGROUND

An Information Commons does not necessarily adhere to any one single definition. Broadly, an Information Commons is a space within an academic library that is designed to encourage and facilitate collaborative work. Thus, often one computer work station is situated within a group seating arrangement. Also, comfortable seating areas, without computers, are arranged for more informal work sessions. In many Information Commons there are several laptop plug-ins and the usual library rule of no cell phone usage is done away with. Essentially, an Information Commons in an academic library is based on the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed and not merely an individual pursuit. Institutions that ascribe to this understanding of knowledge construction are, consequently, invested in providing the space for that construction.

Blogs, wikis, and other Web 2.0 technologies perform the same function and are indicative of the same trends in cyberspace that Information Commons are in the physical space of the library. The term “Web 2.0” was coined in 2004 in a brainstorming session between O’Reilly Media, a leading American media company, and Media Live International, a company that specializes in developing and organizing conferences and events in the technology fields. O’Reilly had an idea for a conference based on what was recognized as a new trend in computer culture: the participatory Web. O’Reilly came up with several core principles to the phenomenon that it called Web 2.0: a focus on the Web as a platform for online services, rather than downloadable software, an architecture based on user participation, cost-effective scalability (the difference between basic and premium service), and the “harnessing of collective intelligence” (O’Reilly, 2005). A study

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