

# LIBRARY FEAR DECONSTRUCTED

## *Overcoming Library Anxiety*

*ABSTRACT: While many first-year college year students have been exposed to a wider gamut of information technology than all previous generations, testing shows little significant improvement in their information literacy skills. Often their familiarity with computers actually disguises their ineptness at “framing research strategies” necessary to accessing information that is relevant, accurate, and authoritative. Freshmen fear of the library, known as “library anxiety,” is examined, showing the critical role librarians (and faculty) can play in disarming this fear and promoting lifelong learners.*

I am delighted to join you at this 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on the First Year Experience and thank you all for coming. My presentation is about fear of the library, commonly known as "library anxiety," and how librarians can play an important role in not only eliminating this fear, but also in creating lifelong learners.

The transition from high school to college can be incredibly exciting and at the same time, terrifying for first-year college students. Moving into unfamiliar surroundings, making new friends, and living on their own can be an overwhelming experience. Along with these new lifestyle changes, college classes and coursework also contribute to even more anxiety. Librarians recognize that certain skills are needed to perform library college research and can help lessen this anxiety by showing the students how to effectively retrieve and evaluate the information that they need for their coursework. Engaging in this process will, hopefully, guide the students not only in classroom assignments, but also in the direction of becoming information literate and capable of surviving in the Information Age.

It is important to realize that in an Information Society, a college student's success is often determined by his/her ability to negotiate the information highways effectively, commonly known as “information literacy” skills. Yet educational training in this area is often left out on the periphery of the students' formal studies as though accessing information and doing research were simple tasks. Most faculty direct students to the library to find the assigned information

with little thought to the extent of the process involved in both locating this information and becoming information literate. Problems arise because: 1) most students have never been to the college library, 2) they often have absolutely no idea what to do once they are in the library, and 3) they are afraid, naturally enough, of making a complete idiot of themselves.

Understanding a need for information is one thing. Knowing where and how to find it efficiently is quite another. In helping to cultivate and refine students' research skills, librarians have a valuable role to play. They can assist students with finding additional information sources on virtually any topic, and, in general, they can help them find sources more quickly and easily. Librarians can also assist faculty by providing information literacy courses to their students and making recommendations for effective faculty-librarian collaboration.

For decades, librarians and library educators have observed that some students feel more comfortable while utilizing libraries than do others. Indeed, the idea that students vary in their levels of apprehension experienced when using academic libraries is not new. Yet, only recently have formal investigations been undertaken on the nature, etiology, characteristics, and consequences of this phenomenon (Jio and Onwuegbuzie, 1999). And, understandably, studies have shown that freshman exhibited the highest level of this documented anxiety. Based on this research, both faculty and librarians should learn how to recognize these “fear” characteristics and know how to ameliorate them by providing the appropriate anxiety-reducing interventions.

Unfortunately, one of the biggest barriers to academic success is a psychological syndrome known as “library anxiety,” fear of the library, and the process of finding the information needed. The idea of fearing the library and librarians was first coined “library anxiety” in 1986 by Constance Mellon (Mellon, 1986). According to Mellon, 75 to 85 percent of undergraduate students described their initial library research experiences in terms of anxiety which stemmed from either the relative size of the library, a lack of knowledge about the location of materials, equipment, and resources of the library, and how to initiate and/or proceed with library research. It was also characterized by feelings that one’s library skills are inadequate compared to those of one’s peers, that this inadequacy is shameful and should be hidden, and that

one's inadequacy is revealed by asking questions. Mellon later concluded that "Students become so anxious about having to gather information in a library for their research papers that they are unable to approach the problem logically or effectively" (Mellon, 1998).

Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, having written extensively about library anxiety, say it is characterized by negative emotions including tension, fear, feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, negative self-defeating thoughts, and mental disorganization – characteristics that impede the development of information literacy (Atlas, 2005). In other studies, library anxiety has been defined simply as "negative feelings toward using an academic library" (Bostick, 1993). Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, and Lichtenstein added more substance to the library anxiety concept, explaining that students' uncomfortable feelings lead to cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioral ramifications that interfere with their abilities to accomplish library tasks (Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, and Lichtenstein, 1996).

In 1992 Sharon L. Bostick devised a valid and reliable instrument to measure Mellon's theory of library anxiety. Her instrument showed that it is possible to identify library anxiety and to measure it quantitatively. Five factors were identified that contribute to library anxiety include (Harnett, 2005):

- Affective Barriers,
- Mechanical Barriers,
- Comfort with the Library,
- Knowledge of the Library, and
- Barriers with Staff.

Affective barriers refer to students' feelings of inadequacy about using the library. These feelings of ineptness are heightened by the assumption that they alone possess incompetent library skills (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie 1997) and to make matters worse, they feel the place is full of fellow students who all appear to know exactly what they are doing. They feel this

incompetence is a source of embarrassment which should be kept hidden, and that asking questions will only reveal further ignorance. In 2001 Barbara Fister asked a number of graduating seniors why they thought some students were reluctant to use the library's reference desk, and what she could do to make the service more appealing. The most creative suggestion she got was to move the reference desk to a more private spot, so that nobody would face the humiliation of being seen asking for help in public. She toyed with the idea of installing a disused confessional that had a sign saying "Bless me, librarian, for I am lost" (Fister, 2002). In all reality, this isn't a bad idea because when most students finally do get the courage to approach the reference librarian, they often they begin in a confessional mode: "I know this is a dumb question but..." Teasing out what nervous students actually need is often a tricky task. Without being too invasive, the librarian must assess what the assignment is, what level of sophistication the student brings to it, and how much information the students can absorb.

Often the ability to locate and use the library equipment is hampered by the physical barriers libraries present. Students rely on mechanical library equipment (e.g., computer printers, copy machines, microform machines, change machines, etc.) and once they finally locate them, they find out that they need specific change to use them or that they must purchase a copy card. Printing documents from a computer in the lab means having to know how and where to retrieve the output, and how and where to pay for it. Microforms present problems in that many new college students don't understand what microforms are, how to use them, or which of the different types of machines should be used to access the microform (Harnett, 2005).

Since college students do rely on library mechanical equipment, it is imperative that the library have appropriate signage posted signifying where the machines are located and also instructions on how to use these machines. Because most students are not eager to ask for help, the library equipment should be constantly monitored by library staff to provide assistance to patrons who may feel uncomfortable asking for help.

Comfort with the library essentially refers to students' reactions to the ambiance of the library and how safe, welcoming, and nonthreatening the library is perceived by them. They get

frustrated trying to locate the reserve desk, the circulation desk, the reference desk, or even how to find the current newspapers and periodicals. Another source of discomfort in the library is library jargon. Words such as reference, reserve, in library use, in cataloging, etc., are confusing to many students. Reference and reserve tend to mean the same to them. When the OPAC indicates a book is "in library use," often the students believe that someone else is already using it in the library so they can't check it out; or if they do try to check it out they discover it is non-circulating. Students rarely understand the difference between magazines and journals, that the term "periodical" encompasses both, and that newspapers are also considered a periodical (Harnett, 2005). Acronyms such as MLA, APA, ILL, etc., should be explained to students since it is unlikely that they will ask and risk feeling that they are asking a stupid question. Several universities, recognizing the confusion library terminology can cause, have published web pages of library glossaries, in order to reduce the negative perceptions of the library.

Knowledge of the library refers to how sharp students think they are with the library. A lack of familiarity leads to frustration, anxiety, and subsequently, further avoidance behaviors. (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 1997). The actual layout of a library can cause confusion and intimidation, and in a large university library, the sheer size can be overwhelming. A common misconception of new students is that the reference collection is everything the library owns, not realizing that there are often (depending on the type and size of library) additional upper and lower floors in the library. Seldom are incoming college freshman students provided a formal tour of the main college/university library, or in some cases, advised that other, more specialized libraries may exist on campus (Harnett, 2005).

The library classification system can also contribute to patron confusion and feelings of helplessness. Most academic libraries use the Library of Congress classification system and many incoming freshman do not understand the LC system or recognize that the call numbers begin with letters rather than numbers. From kindergarten through high school, their school libraries as well as their public libraries are generally organized according to the Dewey Decimal classification system. So, obviously, they do not understand the LC classification system. Mellon

relates an account of an incoming freshman who came to her for reference assistance asking her where she could find Room 231. Mellon explained to the girl that the library did not have a room 231. The girl, visibly upset and frustrated, declared that there must be a room 231 because according to the catalog, the book she was looking for was located in that room. Mellon asked the girl to show her where she got her information and then realized that the girl was talking about the call number RM 231 (Harnett, 2005)!

Librarians can play an important role in providing students with knowledge of the library by offering information literacy courses. Many library databases have different interfaces making it necessary for patrons to be trained in how to use them. The strategies of broadening and narrowing searches, keyword searching versus subject searching, and Boolean logic requires training. Although most databases offer “help pages,” the terminology is often ambiguous to new college students. When an article is found in a database, students may fail to realize that it is merely an abstract of the article and often the database may not provide the full-text of the article (Harnett 2005). By teaching information literacy courses, the students will not only learn how to conduct a successful research project, but it will also help them become information literate, critical thinkers, and lifelong learners.

Along with the responsibility for teaching basic and life-long learning skills, librarians have become aware that the exponential growth of information available to students can be overwhelming. Mellon’s study shows that students are likely to feel more comfortable using the library after attending a traditional staff-led bibliographic instruction session, mainly due to the interaction the students have with the librarian. Apparently a staff-led library instruction session can serve as a time for the students to meet and get to know the librarian as someone who can be a valuable resource in the future. Therefore, bibliographic instruction should be used not only as a session for teaching students how to efficiently and effectively use online catalogs and electronic databases, but also as a time to ensure students feel comfortable in the library and with the librarian (Van Scoyoc, 2003).

Barriers with staff refer to the perception students have that librarians and other library staff members are intimidating and unapproachable. In addition, the librarian is perceived as being too busy to provide assistance in using the library (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie, 1997). The library user's first impression upon entering any library should be one that is inviting and welcoming. The reference librarians can have the biggest impact on this impression because they are generally the first point of contact users have upon entering the library. Approachability includes both verbal and non-verbal communication. Good verbal communication relies less on the use of library jargon and requires a degree of skill with the reference interview. During the reference interview, it is important that the librarian generates questions relevant to the subject the student is researching, to be openly interested in what kind of information the student is seeking, and to ensure that the student's needs have been met. Positive, non-verbal communication exhibits itself through certain behaviors such as raised eyebrows, eye contact, nodding, and most importantly – smiling!

In truth, almost all anxiety-reducing interventions require interpersonal interactions (between a student and a librarian, or sometimes a faculty member), but this flies in the face of everyone's desire for instant information gratification. Both interactions between people and the development of interpersonal skills require time that few want to make a commitment to – especially if they think they can avoid the library (and librarians) and just “Google” it.

Could it really be that the biggest reason patrons do not go to the library is because they are afraid of the librarians? Why are they afraid of us? What makes us so scary? Most perceptions of librarians are that they are intimidating and unapproachable. To quote Michel C. Atlas (2005), “A patron asking for help from a librarian has been equated with a man asking for driving directions. Both require admitting ignorance, taking time to ask, and perhaps, a degree of embarrassment.” (It may possibly be that these individuals perceive needing help in the library as a failure.) He then goes on to say, “It is hard to get instant gratification from a librarian – just ask our spouses. A librarian may want to take the time to conduct a reference interview, ask questions and explain what he or she is doing, to teach inquirers how to find information

themselves, or suggest additional options.” But this takes time, and is not convenient information gathering to the student who just wants to get the assignment done, and avoid the anxiety of involving a librarian.

Often the difference between “convenient information,” and “added value information,” requires that the student know how to ask for information assistance. This reluctance to ask for help (not dissimilar to the driver who refuses to stop and inquire about directions, even though he is lost) may be at the root of “information dyslexia,” a common library syndrome exhibited by students (and often faculty) who have not yet come to understand that “fear of the library” is a common disease that manifests itself in many ways – and most always ends in a dysfunctional information quest.

How can librarians help these individuals overcome this fear and make them understand that **not** being able to take full advantage of today’s vast array of information resources instantly is not a failing? Obviously, patrons who do not consider libraries as warm, welcoming, non-threatening places will not visit a library and will certainly not approach a reference librarian. A crucial factor librarians need to realize is that the minute a patron enters the library, his/her impression of the library is made by the greeting he/she receives. It may difficult for him/her to ask a question, generally because he/she is afraid of asking a “stupid” question, and is also terrified of receiving an unenthusiastic and/or unhelpful response from the librarian.

Since it is a well-known fact that people like to go where they feel welcome and comfortable, libraries (and librarians) need to create such an environment. Think about it – if you go to any type of a retail store and you’re greeted with a snarly comment such as, “What do you want?” Would you go back? I doubt it, I certainly wouldn’t! Another reason patrons are reluctant to ask librarians for help is because they think the librarians are too busy to help. But what they don’t know is what the librarians are busy doing. As Mellon (1988) says, “few people outside the field of librarianship have any idea what librarians do.” Librarians cannot effectively serve those who understand neither their purpose nor their expertise. So, if they (the



users/patrons) do not bring their questions and information requests to us, they will have absolutely no idea of all the wonderful things we can and will do for them.

Libraries are returning to their roots as social institutions – a place where you can hang out with friends, read the newspaper, work on a group project, grab a snack, have a cup of coffee, and even check your e-mail. The social nature of the academic library in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is (or it should be) somewhat different and certainly noisier. It should be a place to meet, greet, and socialize. The enduring value of the library as a cultural meeting place is now taking on a more extroverted character as librarians realize how potent that social element can be in fostering learning (Fister, 2004). As President Barak Obama stated in his keynote presentation at the 2005 ALA Annual Conference, “More than a building that houses books and data, libraries represent a window to a larger world, the place where we’ve always come to discover big ideas and profound concepts that help move the American story forward and the human story forward” (Obama, 2005).

Like dancing, using a library is a social skill, one that requires focused attention and is more easily learned when taught by a competent instructor – in this case, a librarian. Freshmen often are library wallflowers who never learn the art of acquiring information. And, the longer they put off learning this skill, the higher are the chances that they will not succeed academically – or in life.

So, the next time you have a need for information (which occurs to most people daily), take that lifelong learning step across the library anxiety divide and simply ask a librarian, “Could you help me?” And take your time explaining your information need(s). After all, you are the sum of your decisions, and the more informed they are, the better choices you will make, and the more likely you will succeed in life and academically!

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