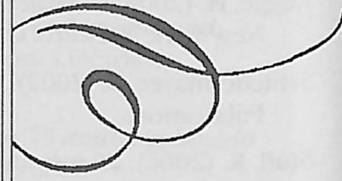


STILL EVOLVING OR FACING EXTINCTION? REFERENCE-AS-PLACE

by Susan M. Frey & Anthony Kaiser



LIBRARY-AS-PLACE

For the past two decades librarians have been responding to profound societal and educational changes brought about by the increasing digitization of information and the ubiquity of the Internet. So many libraries now offer their resources and services online that the term, "virtual library," has become cliché. Librarians have been so successful at extending information services into the cyber-community that some administrators and policy-makers have begun questioning the necessity of the physical library. "Why bother with the expense of maintaining a library building," some speculate, "when users can get their information needs met online?" Implicit in this question are two critical and, we believe, false assumptions. First, those posing this question assume that all information will someday be digitized and second, that the sole function of the library is that of a warehouse of information — a place to house and preserve physical matter. Based on these assumptions some people reason that if it is possible to make all information available electronically, why bother with the physical warehouse? We have several points to make in response to this outlook.

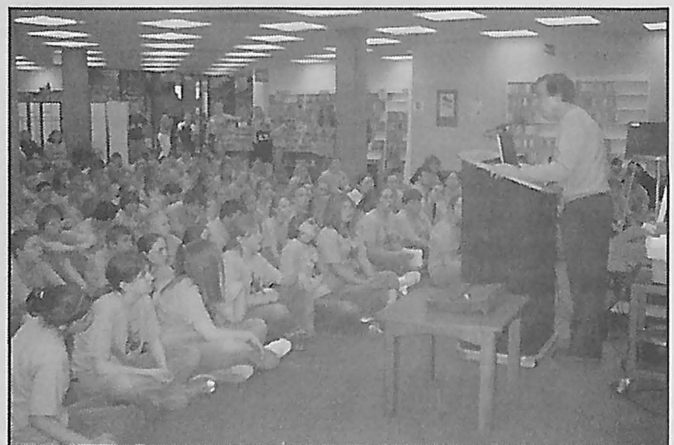
Even if we accept the limitations of the library-as-warehouse concept, it is still inaccurate to assume that library users want all information to be entirely in electronic format. A recent study revealed that although faculty value the ease of electronic access to information, they also expect that their academic library maintain a print archive of select material for browsing and backup purposes (Palmer & Sandler, 2003). The library-as-warehouse concept is narrow and limiting because it makes no room for any idea other than that users come to the library for artifacts of information. This is not true. Libraries have long been regarded as social centers where scholars, students, and citizens congregate. Academic libraries are often viewed as the heart of the campus. When asked, students repeatedly respond that, besides access to information, they want their library to offer study rooms, cafés, classrooms, meetings rooms, and quiet spaces for solitude (Demas & Sherer, 2002).

With regards to digitizing information, as a profession Library Science has a justly-earned reputation for

embracing new technology. One has only to peruse the webpages of the Library of Congress' *American Memory* (at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>), the British Library's *Turning the Pages* (at <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/ttpbooks.html>), or *Gallica* (at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/>) from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France to see stunning examples of digitized library collections. But even supposing there will come a day when all print matter is digitized, or all information is exclusively created in electronic format, few librarians believe that they work in a warehouse.

Librarians provide people with much more than informational inventory. In the course of their duties, they form rich, reciprocal relationships with library users. It is true that these relationships sometimes blossom when communication is solely filtered through the telephone, e-mail, instant messenger, and texting. But as yet, most librarians believe that nothing compares with the intimacy of face-to-face interaction. Library users feel this closeness as well. Once forming a bond with a librarian in person, many users claim said librarian as their favored information guide.

But faced with budgetary restrictions, and seduced by the glow of new technologies, people can easily trivialize the social and humanistic roles that libraries play in people's lives. To deny these cultural and societal roles is, we believe, a grave mistake. It is in our nature, as human beings, to seek out physical places in



Educational event held on the first floor of the ISU Library.

which to congregate. Our libraries are one of these places. Geoffrey Freeman (2005), in a report published by the Council on Library and Information Resources aptly writes, "Whereas the internet has tended to isolate people, the library, as a physical place, has done just the opposite" (p. 3).

In response to the concept of the library-as-warehouse, and the challenge by administrators that librarians demonstrate the relevancy of the library proper, a growing body of literature on the library-as-place is emerging. This paper explores our experiences with this issue in relation to Indiana State University Library, paying particular attention to the recent redesign of our library reference desk, as we ask the question: Is the physical reference desk, like the library building, in danger of becoming extinct?

LIBRARY-AS-PLACE AT ISU

Indiana State University (ISU) is a Carnegie doctoral/research institution that is especially committed to building community. Part of ISU's mission is the development of collaborative partnerships with educational, business, social service, cultural, and government concerns that contribute to the academic mission of the university and directly benefit the community. In 2006 the Carnegie Foundation placed ISU in the Curricular Engagement and Outreach category. This recognizes substantial commitment to community collaboration and extensive curriculum-based outreach initiative. Only 62 institutions in the U.S. have been granted this Carnegie classification.

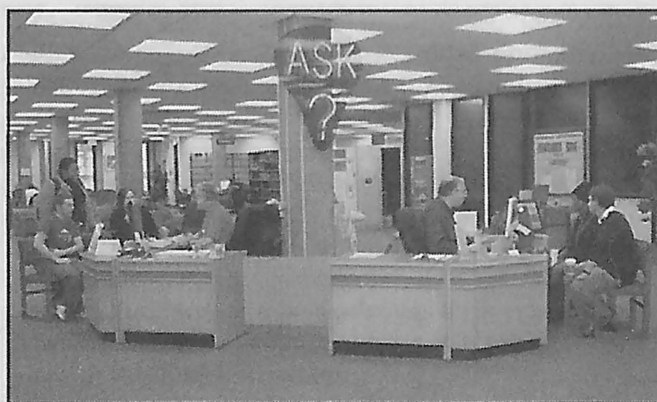
In line with the campus mission, the ISU Cunningham Memorial Library has established itself as a learning environment and community center. The library serves a broad spectrum of users such as students and staff/faculty from ISU, as well as users from other local institutions and the local community at large. Our Special Collections Department assists users globally, as do the reference librarians on site and through a suite of online reference services.

In reaching out to the campus, local, and global communities, we host many well-attended events. In 2006 the library hosted 22 scholarly and/or community events and in 2007 we hosted over of 33. Although there are designated quiet study areas in the building, the first floor of the library is an open, fluid space that is regularly reconfigured with movable walls and screens to accommodate community and social activities such as lectures from internationally-recognized scholars and authors, gaming tournaments, film series, symposia, poetry readings, impromptu group study, and casual gatherings. Plans are underway to move the campus *Writing Center* into the first floor of the library to help centralize campus support services. In addition to the reference desk, the first floor is also the site of

many collaborative computer work stations, a computer cluster, a current periodicals reading area, the reference collection, a browsing collection of popular books, computer games, CDs and DVDs, a TV/gaming room, and the circulation counter.

Also on the first floor is the library's café, the *Cup & Chaucer*, which offers a variety of snacks, drinks, and hot meals. Library users are welcome to carry their food throughout the building or to watch CNN on the café's wide-screen TV. As expected, users visit the library to attend lectures, study alone or in groups, talk with the reference librarians, use the computers, and to charge out materials. However, they also visit us regularly to play computer games and board games, attend social events, eat a meal, hook up with their friends, and watch television. The ISU Library has succeeded in creating what has been coined the "Borders experience," a term named after the popular bookstore of the same name. Such an atmosphere is "...a place where you can relax and explore...where you can stay in a comfortable, community atmosphere" (Dempsey, 2004, p. 32).

How traditional reference service fits into such a non-traditional, dynamic environment is something we asked ourselves when we had the opportunity to redesign the reference desk in 2006. We were not at a loss for innovative examples. Since the 1980s, reference librarians have been experimenting with new forms of onsite service including reference-by-appointment, reference rovers, tiered services, and extended use of paraprofessionals (Jackson, 2002). The information commons is a recent development in this investigation into alternative forms of information service (Spencer, 2006). In considering the future of reference service, some have even suggested that libraries eliminate the reference desk altogether (Faries, 1994). Although we strongly believe that it is worthwhile to reevaluate traditional practices, we realize that the elimination of an information service point in our library is not practical at this time. For us, an onsite reference station plays a critical role in the library-as-place because our reference desk is heavily used by the



ISU Library's new reference desk with dual keyboard and monitors.

campus and local communities. In the end, we replaced our old desk with a new one, hoping that its new placement and design would help to enhance service.

NEW REFERENCE DESK

For many years the reference desk at the ISU Library had been near a back wall, far from the main entrance and was approached by users from two directions. Although people could find us, the desk was not optimally located near heavy traffic patterns of users who were heading to the more popular collections and the first floor computer cluster. The desk was also not easily visible to users coming to the library for programmed events. In the summer of 2006, a new octagonal-shaped desk was installed towards the front of the main floor, in the direct line-of-sight of the main entrance. Now the desk is one of the first things that people see when they walk into the library. The new desk is also situated closer to the first floor computer cluster and the library's circulation counter. To make it even more difficult to miss, a large neon sign spelling out the word, ASK with a large question mark following it, was placed above the desk. This sign has had an unintended consequence, as some students no longer refer to the desk as the information or reference desk, but rather the "ask desk."

The shape and position of the desk makes it more welcoming and easier to find. Users can approach us from all sides and find inviting seats placed around the perimeter of the desk, so that they can sit down and spend some time with us. We noticed that in just one year after installing the new desk, reference questions increased by 44%. In commenting on the new desk, one ISU student remarked, "It's nice. When you walk in it's the first thing you see. Computers are sometimes confusing. As long as students are not afraid to ask questions, it is a good thing" (Dent, 2006).

Two computers were installed at the desk and were fitted with dual input and output devices. This means that for each computer, one monitor, mouse, and keyboard faces inward towards the librarian, while another set faces outward towards the user. Because of the dual monitors, users can comfortably see what the librarian is doing on the reference computer because they have their own monitor to view on the opposite side of the desk. The ISU reference librarians had been using dual monitors at the reference desk for a number of years. The idea of installing dual keyboards and mice was inspired by the University of South Dakota (Aldrich, 2007). With the addition of these input devices, users now have their own mouse and keyboard. Because of this arrangement, we librarians can, and do, easily give up control of the computer to the user. This minor addition of hardware allows our users

to engage in a more collaborative reference exchange with us. We have found that our users are more engaged in the research process because they can actively work with us in searching for information in this shared work space. This empowers them and helps us to forge collegial, positive connections with them.

REFERENCE-AS-PLACE

For those who believe that the days of onsite reference service are numbered because of an anticipated avalanche of online services, our response is: you may be right! As reference professionals it's our job to anticipate users' needs and upcoming trends, but exactly when this extinction would come about is another matter. While predicting the near future is a worthwhile way to reevaluate current practices, attempting to predict the distant future can bleed over into fiction. If the physical reference desk someday becomes extinct, or if it evolves into something unrecognizable to us today, we believe that this will most likely take many more decades to come about. As yet, we still see the need for a reference desk at the ISU Library. Just as we witness the potency of the library-as-place at our university, so too do we, and our users, experience reference-as-place in our community-centered library. We find that although our users are delighted with the convenience of our extensive online services, they also want to interact with us personally when they are in the library, and they appreciate finding us at an easily located service point.

In light of the many creative alternatives to traditional desk service that have emerged over the years, it could be argued that instead of replacing our old desk with a new one, we missed the opportunity of experimenting with a non-traditional form of onsite service, such as roving service or reference-by-appointment. This is a valid proposition and one we must responsibly address as we continue to examine and assess what it is that we do. We suppose that there may come a time for us to experiment with different types of onsite reference, and we value the work that others have done in pioneering new forms of service, but for now, we are enjoying our new desk, interaction with our users, and our library.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Susan M. Frey is Reference & Instruction Librarian at Indiana State University Library. Her research interests focus on teaching and learning, educational technology, and information and society. She may be contacted at sfrey@isugw.indstate.edu.



Anthony Kaiser is Head of Reference & Instruction at Indiana State University Library. His research interests are educational technology and online learning. He may be contacted at akaiser3@isugw.indstate.edu.

