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Commentary

Playing for Keeps

Lifelong Learning in the Ludic Library

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We take information literacy seriously, yet in a sense, the best researchers are playful. How might concepts of play inform our practice in libraries made for learning? What if we reconceptualized research from the systematic acquisition and use of intellectual property to a more creative and open approach to engaging with ideas in motion? What does it mean to be information literate in a world in which "publish" is a button?

This commentary is based on the presentation delivered at the College & Research Division's luncheon during the Pennsylvania Library Association's annual conference in October 2012.

When I was in college I was one of those nerdy kids who would tear through a syllabus to find out what kind of paper we got to write. In my junior year, though, I hit a snag. I was taking a course on the works of Dostoevsky, and when the teacher brought up my favorite novel, *The Idiot,* he said we would skip that one because he did not understand it. I went up after class to point out how wrong he was, how that novel was the key to all of Dostoevsky's work. He said, "Great. You can explain it to me in your paper." For the first time, I was paralyzed, staring at a blank page. Unfortunately, while I was certain the novel was full of meaning, I was not actually sure what that meaning was. None of the sources that I found in the library inspired me. I stared at the book and the blank page and then the calendar and finally started because I was running out of time. The minute I started writing, I found the key, a central idea that unlocked everything, and it flowed. It flowed because I was so deeply invested in saying something that had not been said before. It flowed because making a case for the novel mattered to me. And yes, once I knew what I wanted to say, I found I needed to consult other sources to make sure my claims were sound.

That was an exhilarating experience. Even though I enjoyed writing papers, this one was different. It mattered in a way nothing else had. And when the teacher told me it gave him a new respect for the novel, and a new way to think about it, that reward meant far more than a grade.

A different story about doing research is told in a marketing video at the website for Citelighter (www.citelighter.com), software students can use to organize and document their research. "Naturally, we strive to achieve our dreams," the video starts out, with cheerful, uplifting music. "But life is downright hectic. You have all of your classes, each assigning books, papers and projects. You have to make money, stay healthy, and hang out with friends. When you finally have time to really chase those dreams, you realize you have too much to handle." The program promises to help students get organized. "Just go to your favorite sources," the video says, "to find the facts you need for your paper." After you have copied, rearranged, and stitched them together, all you have to do is press a button and your paper is done. Better yet, the snippets you copy are shared so that students can use them to build more papers.

This product illustrates how many students approach research papers. We know from Project Information Literacy (www.projectinfolit.org) that students are pragmatic, and consider research something they need to get through using a familiar strategy and familiar databases. While librarians and instructors imagine research as a chance to explore, students work hard at reducing the overwhelming number of choices before them. They often use whatever tools have worked before and don't want to invest the time in learning new strategies or getting distracted by reading something that turns out not to be useful.

The practical cut-and-paste approach to sources is confirmed – and then some – by The Citation Project, a discouraging study of first-year writing (site.citationproject.net). It is not that students plagiarize (though some do), and it is not that they do not know how to use sources effectively in writing (though mostly they do not). They do not understand the sources they use. That could be because they do not even *read* them. Almost all of the material students in the study drew from sources was quoted directly, rather than being paraphrased or summarized, and most quotes were from the first or second page of the source. It seemed students did not read beyond the point where they found a useable quote. This is not what we hope for when we assign research. Yet grabbing quotes and gluing them together is exactly what Citelighter is for. The video divides research into two parts: finding facts and making an argument. Anything that comes from a source is called a "fact," and the role of facts is to support an argument.

We are schooling students to take a position about something they do not know much about and suggest in the process that all knowledge is pretty much the expressions of personal opinion supported by cherry-picked facts, not an ethical and open-ended process of reasoning from evidence. And this is a shame, because we would like to think that an important part of what students learn in college is respect for knowledge gained through interaction with sources, not simply using sources the way advertisers, politicians, and lobbyists do. We want students to recognize that sources come from people like them and that, just like the authors of those sources, they play a role in the making of knowledge. We want liberal learning to be truly liberating, and we want the library to play a role in that act of liberation. Instead, we hand them a set of rules, and they go shopping for ingredients. They also have strict guidelines on how those ingredients must be listed on a label, one of those labels required by law that nobody actually reads.

This practice is closely related to Paulo Freire's (1993) banking concept of education, the process of depositing information into the heads of students, a kind of teaching he felt was deliberately oppressive. It first tells students their job is to listen, not to create or question. Second, it suggests that knowledge is something concrete, immutable, not subject to change. In contrast, problem-posing education, he felt, gives students the freedom to ask questions and to engage in answering them, a kind of education that is "the practice of freedom" – which is what

liberal education is meant to be. When students think of knowledge as stuff they acquire from Google or the library's various shopping platforms, we have moved from the bank into the shopping mall. We haven't moved very far at all.

What does play have to do with all this? If you look the word up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* the definitions go on for pages. It is a rich word that means a whole lot of things: room for movement, a dramatic performance of a story, a method of making words mean something different than usual, to ridicule or mock, to amuse oneself, to engage in a game, to joke, to set in opposition, to perform a role involving mimicry, to have fun. These meanings tend to fall into two categories, performance and freedom. In a way, these map to two different kinds of play that engage different parts of the brain. *Epistemic* play focuses on finding ways to accomplish goals, while *ludic* play is exploratory, improvisatory, and engaged in the moment rather than in a future goal. Children encounter water and test it, then smack its surface to see what happens. Later, water might become a medium in which they compete with others to see who can swim the fastest, another aspect of play representing an organized competition that relies on practice and knowing the rules, rules that often reflect social structures and beliefs.

Gamification, the introduction of game-like rewards into the design of software platforms to encourage involvement, has stirred some interest in higher education, but I am a bit leery of the temptation to introduce competition as a lever for engagement. When it comes to the way knowledge works, winning isn't everything. On the contrary, it is an invitation to take shortcuts or oversimplify things that are complex in order to get to the end successfully. Getting really good at following rules may actually act against creativity and discovery. It makes the perfection of performance more important than freedom, just as earning a grade by figuring out what the teacher wants may distract students from exploring ideas that matter to them. Ian Bogost (2011), a game scholar, has criticized the faddish adoption of gamification in marketing and education, calling it "exploitationware." He demonstrated its problems by creating a Facebook game called Cow Clicker – a totally pointless yet horribly addictive game that illustrated the pointlessness of games like Farmville (Bogost, 2010).

If we were to design an information literacy cow clicker, we would have a game that explains to students how to work the library, which buttons to push, which behaviors lead to winning good grades, and how to persist while doing something that has no intrinsic meaning. On the other hand, there might be value in a game that explores how the library works. The former is merely instrumental. It would explain how to play by the rules, however peculiar and arbitrary those rules might seem. It would imply that understanding and complying with rules is the purpose. The latter could give students a more critical approach to those rules and the understanding that would allow them to break the rules effectively. Because when we use a library, we are breaking it open, we are breaking ideas free from it, cracking the code, opening the library up as we open our minds. And we cannot do that work if all we are focused on is performing tasks mechanically according to the rules.

I was struck by a metaphor used by Alison Gopnik (2005) in a *New York Times* essay in which she wrote about how children learn by playing. "Imagine if baseball were taught the way science is taught in most inner-city schools," she wrote. "Schoolchildren would get lectures about the history of the World Series. High school students would occasionally reproduce famous plays of the past. Nobody would get in the game themselves until graduate school." She pointed out that some learning does not lend itself to ludic play. Learning to read involves mastering some unnatural behaviors that are not intrinsically rewarding but which become rewarding when they are so thoroughly mastered that the work involved becomes effortless and transparent. It is not until children have practiced and developed facility with deciphering words and have mastered basic reading comprehension that they can experience what psychologist Victor Nell (1988) calls "ludic reading," the trancelike state we experience when "lost in a book."

In our classes, we want students to *do* actual research, not just practice certain routine moves, but there is a certain amount of practice involved before they can play in the library with confidence. This is why the 50-minute one-shot instruction session is so frustrating. Luckily, we are not the only ones guiding our students' learning. When

we have a one-shot, we're simply helping them get ready to play. But as we do that, it is important to inject in the preparation the understanding that pushing the right levers, clicking buttons, and citing sources with precision is not the point. It is not about playing the part of a scholar, pretending to be someone you are not. It is about the freedom that comes from playing with ideas. It is a tricky balancing act – separating the epistemic game from the deeper, more serious, less goal-oriented, more exploratory play that is at the heart of authentic research.

We face a mirror image of this problem when it comes to our faculty. In higher education we have, to our shame, gamified research in the marketing sense of the word. Graduate students are schooled in the arbitrary rules of the game – you need to publish in this high-impact journal, even though we know the formula for measuring impact is flawed; you need to finely slice your research so you can get as many publications out of it as possible. The one who gets the most high-scoring lines on their CV wins. What is lost in the process is schooling in the purpose and ethics of research. Playing the game often interferes with sharing discoveries. And we know all too well that the artificial scarcity of published knowledge is interfering with scholarship.

This is why we need to be totally transparent about what it all costs, not just financially but culturally. When we become a wallet to pay for our communities' access to information so that they can advance their own careers – but a doctor in rural Pennsylvania cannot read the article that might help her diagnose and treat one of her patients – we have failed. When a conservation officer in Malawi cannot read new research about how to sustain fisheries that are needed to feed his people, then we have failed. When we spend four years teaching students to use proprietary databases, then cut them off the day they graduate, we have failed. Without access to scholarship, most of the people of the world are unable to play with ideas the way we know can make a difference. If ideas matter, if libraries make a difference, they should not be available only to the few.

The value of our profession and of the library as a social institution is that we are uniquely positioned to see the big picture, to recognize patterns in the ways societies create and share knowledge, to make knowledge accessible so that it can enable new knowledge. Our value is also in our public purpose: to defend intellectual freedom and to give everyone a chance to participate in that freedom.

How do we create libraries that support play in the best sense of word?

When I was staring at a blank page not long ago, wondering how to make a case for ludic libraries, I came across a book on urban public spaces, *The Ludic City* by Quentin Stevens (2007). In it he looks at how people lay claim to public space and make it their own, and they do so in a manner that is not what we usually think of when we think about urban development. He writes about public spaces as flexible, ambiguous, and continually redefined by their inhabitants. "Play," he says, "contains utopian impulses. It is non-exploitative and non-hierarchical. Play is subversive of social order . . . The experience of urban space is characterized by multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradictions, the unpredictable and the unfamiliar" (pp. 24-25). This sounds very much like a library, one that belongs to and is transformed by students, who are in turn transformed in ways nobody can quite predict. That kind of transformation requires that students learn how the library works, but once they are comfortable with both understanding and critiquing those rules, they can begin to improvise and explore. Stevens concludes, "play is the actualization of freedom, adventure, creativity, and discovery" (p. 218).

Libraries speak to people this way, as inhabitable spaces that enable freedom. They are on the one hand rule-bound, traditional, and rather mysterious. They are a little bit scary at first because they demand a certain amount of mastery from those who will penetrate their secrets. Yet we are there to help anyone who wants to play by giving them a chance to master the rules so that they can proceed to break them – playing with ideas in a way that offers freedom, freedom to think, to inquire, and to discover, not just to acquire information and be productive, but rather to engage in the seriously playful practice of freedom.

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