

The “L” Word

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According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a library is “a place in which literary, musical, artistic, or reference materials (as books, manuscripts, recordings, or films) are kept for use but not for sale” (2010). Although this definition is lacking, it will provide a starting point for a discussion on the word “library” and what it is and should connote. Some think that there may be a better word to describe the changing role of the library in society, but principles and ideas that form the foundation for library science are still applicable today. These fundamentals have allowed change and are the driving force for revision in the field today.

The word “library” is an institution to the profession and the concept of collecting, organizing and preserving information for educational use. The word is not essential, but the word has a history that is still pertinent to the profession and field today. In 1931, Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan declared the five principles that form the foundation of librarianship as a service profession (Haycock & Sheldon, 2008). In turn, these principles have allowed changes in the field based on technology and the end user. There are two laws that have generated change and call for agility in the field.

The first law, “books are for use,” brings to light the primary focus for librarians: the end user. Users are at the center of all decisions made regarding a library (Haycock & Sheldon, 2008). Just as in any service profession, the customers’ needs come first. Foremost, a library must provide resources specific to its community of users and effectively distribute it. It must also provide access to persistent local and remote collections (Keller, Reich, & Herkovic, 2003). Libraries have to adjust according to its user-base. Today, the role of the library has expanded to include story time for youth, book clubs for adolescents, continuing education for adults and even knitting circles. Libraries have evolved and continue to become the community centers for

social progress. As expanded resources are promoted, the word “library” will come to mean something different for future generations.

Ranganathan’s fifth law stated that “the library is a growing organism.” This is evident not only in the exponentially growing amount of resources that can be accessed, but also in changes to make libraries virtually accessible. This is necessary for libraries to stay relevant and valuable in today’s online and digital society. Naturally, users will rely on the most readily available source of information without considering the credibility and quality of the source (Haycock & Sheldon, 2008). Libraries must adapt to make accessing information easier for the community they serve. Librarians are tasked with educating their community on how and where to find quality resources using the library’s tools. Librarians must sell the value of using the library instead of an Internet search. As Dr. Mel Levine stated, “The library is about delayed gratification...The library slows you down and makes you think” (as cited in Zaslow, 2007). As the library grows with technology, libraries must also consider preservation of online sources. Online information is worthless if it is not able to be accessed repeatedly. For this reason, systems have been developed for libraries to store online journals and articles (Keller, Reich, & Herkovic, 2003). This ensures that the original information is accessible for future users.

As it should, the word “library” means different things to different users. Each community differs and their respective library should cater to those differences. Some may think that the term “library” is outdated, but they may not realize that libraries are constantly changing. It is the librarian’s duty to market resources to users that may think libraries are obsolete. Librarians should educate users to help change the perception of libraries rather than change the word that denotes the place where resources are stored and preserved.

References

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