

The Postmodern Library in an Age of Assessment

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Introduction

Today's academic libraries face unprecedented challenges. The relentless pace of change combined with increasing levels of complexity and ambiguity are creating chaotic and turbulent work environments. Even the largest and wealthiest of libraries are straining to meet escalating demands for new technologies, new skills, and new services in the midst of static or declining budgets. At the center of it all is the "dynamic of perpetual change," the defining challenge for today's library.¹ According to organizational theorist William Bergquist, the present environment of unpredictable and perpetual change is not a phase or a period of transition but the new reality.² While it may be easy to accept this new reality on an intellectual level, learning how to manage it on a day-to-day basis is difficult. In order to meet the demands of this new environment, experts advocate the creation of flexible, highly responsive, and collaborative organizational structures. Librarians, for the most part, have heeded their advice and are working to build such structures.

But just as we're beginning to feel more comfortable in the flexible, innovative organizations we're helping to cre-

ate, just when we're learning to embrace our ambiguous and incessantly evolving environments, just when we're ready to ride the winds of change, the dynamic of perpetual change strikes again. This time, it's higher education's demand for "proof" of the library's impact on the educational experience of the students. While reliable and statistically valid data of this caliber is difficult to acquire and track under the best of conditions, it seems almost impossible in the turbulent world of today's library. How do we meet these demands for hard scientific evidence when such data are dependent on stable conditions and controllable variables? The dynamic of perpetual change requires that we adopt a new conceptual framework, a different mental construct if the library, now postmodern, is to survive in an age of assessment.

Modern vs Postmodern

Because scholars do not agree on a common definition of "postmodernism," allow me to provide a simplified and rather generic overview of its basic premises and concepts. First, the term "postmodern" refers to both a historical period and a new theoretical construct that marked the end of

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the Modern Era. The Modern Era, also known as the Age of Reason, extended from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century in Western civilization and is characterized by an unassailable faith in science, progress and rationality.³ Sir Isaac Newton revealed a universe not of supernatural or mysterious forces but one of mechanical precision conforming to universal laws. The values of the age of enlightenment—predictability, certainty, control, absolute truths, and order—are hallmarks of the Modern age and are still reflected in every aspect of our society.³

The term “postmodern” refers to both the historical time period following the Modern Era and the cultural shift of the later 20th century. Postmodern theorists reject the values and belief systems of the previous Modern age. They question convention, tradition, and especially the old “metanarratives” or mythic stories that infuse history with purpose and meaning.⁴ A central theme in postmodern theory is the view that reality is a social construction, not an objective reality; reality is “made” not “found”. While the cosmos may be “real,” its meaning is “constructed”.⁵ In reaction to the homogeneity of modernist thought, postmodernism emphasizes subjectivity and multiple realities; plurality and diversity are valued more than the universal. The differences between the modern and postmodern belief systems can be illustrated by the following dichotomies.⁶

Modern	Postmodern
Determinacy	Indeterminacy
Individual	Relationships
Certainty	Uncertainty
Distance	Participation
Design	Chance
Totalization	Deconstruction
Universal	Particular
Stability	Fluidity

Despite the high tech trappings and organizational innovations, libraries are by their very nature “modernist” institutions. They embody the values of orderliness, reliability, predictability and rationality. They are of necessity rule-bound, mechanistic, linear organizations. In fact, this has been their strength. Libraries do an excellent job of efficiently processing, organizing and making accessible vast amounts of material. This “modern” approach to the world of information has been successful for hundreds of years. It’s no wonder that librarians keep trying to organize the electronic information environment; the “elegant,

hierarchical, and logical simplicity” of the library’s traditional system has served us well and is likely to do so for a long time to come.⁷

Not until the phenomenal growth of the Web and the emerging digital environment—both postmodern phenomena—have the efficacies of the traditional structures and methodologies of librarianship been seriously challenged. Librarians as a whole have been slow to recognize the limitations of their traditional “metanarrative” in a postmodern information age. Why? Because traditional librarianship tells us that “bibliographic control is how we, as librarians, think and should think. It is the essence of what we do and how we do it.”⁸ This is our construction of reality. But if books and libraries embody modernist values such as linearity, order, hierarchy and structure, the Web page and the Internet reflect postmodern values: nonlinearity, equality of value and randomness.⁹ Our postmodern condition requires that we alter our current metanarrative or construction of reality if we are to accommodate these new values without forfeiting our traditional core values.

The Postmodern Academic Library

Postmodern organizations might best be described as chaotic systems. Such systems possess structure but may shift at any moment to adapt to changing conditions. They continually reorganize themselves in response to their environment. They are poised on the edge of chaos. This image of the edge, the organization that exists on the boundaries of colliding cultures emphasizes the ambiguous but vital nature of the postmodern organization.¹⁰ According to Bergquist, postmodern organizations possess several distinctive features such as unclear boundaries, flexible and collaborative internal structures, and clear missions. In addition, these organizations rely on an instantaneous and informal communication style with information flowing up and down and across the organization. This free flow of ideas allows the organization to quickly identify and respond to problems and opportunities.¹¹

Bergquist identifies four types of postmodern organizations: hybrid, cyclical, intersect, and turbulent.¹² Libraries are good examples of hybrid organizations, containing a mixture of postmodern, modern and premodern elements and values. Like all postmodern organizations, the hybrid library is marked by fragmentation, inconsistency, and disequilibrium. The once clearly identifiable boundaries of library collections and services are increasingly diffuse. Approaches and solutions to problems that were successful in the past no longer seem to work. Employees are stressed

and anxious because the library has changed from a stable and predictable environment to an ambiguous and turbulent environment. Although looser boundaries have enabled libraries to respond quickly and effectively to new customer needs, shifting demands and constantly changing technologies, open boundaries leave the organization vulnerable to powerful and competing outside forces.¹³

The changes we are experiencing today in our organizations, according to Bergquist, are not first order or single loop changes; in other words, they are not reversible. Libraries are in the midst of second order or transformational change. Second order change is about doing things differently, acting in new ways, moving in a new direction.¹⁴ As Bergquist observes, “the multiple changes occurring in many contemporary organizations are not reversible. We will see no return to the old order.”¹⁵

The Assessment Movement

For the past twenty years, increasing pressure has been brought to bear on universities and colleges to “prove” the effectiveness of their programs, to be accountable for the *outcomes* of the educational process. This pressure is not coming solely from state agencies or accreditors but from a wide spectrum of interested parties: trustees, board members, governors, legislators, employers, parents and the students themselves.¹⁶ Simply stated, societal expectations have changed; educational institutions must now provide tangible evidence that students gain specific knowledge and skills as a result of their educational experience. The two most prominent developments, the assessment and accountability movements, are the results of efforts to measure student achievement and document institutional effectiveness.

The term “assessment” is “most often associated with the measurement of educational outcomes” and until very recently, has been synonymous with testing and evaluation.¹⁷ SATs, placement tests, and comprehensive exams are all well-established methods of measuring student learning in this assessment context. However, the logic of what we’ll call “traditional assessment” reflects a modernist sensibility. Traditional assessment is primarily mechanistic and reductionist in its concepts and methodology. We can compare it to Newtonian physics. Newton viewed the universe as a machine made up of individual parts that operated according to general rules or principles. Through the study of the parts, one could gain an understanding of the whole.¹⁸ The traditional assessment framework views student learning in much the same way, as an amalgamation of discrete pieces of information—facts—that can be measured and

counted to determine a student’s level of knowledge. In this model, learning is assumed to be a linear and quantifiable event. The assessment tools themselves—quantitative measures and numerical analyses—are the results of the primary assumptions. The methodologies of this kind of assessment can only function efficiently in a Newtonian universe, a stable, predictable, controllable and unchanging environment. There is no room in this conceptual framework for complexity, ambiguity, subjectivity or paradox, all of which are not only primary characteristics of learning but of the postmodern condition.

Student Learning Assessment

So how does the postmodern library—a fluid, ambiguous, “quantum” organization—meet the demands of traditional “Newtonian” assessment? It doesn’t. A postmodern reality requires postmodern assessment. Our postmodern times call for a different paradigm of assessment that focuses not on the end products of learning but on the learning process itself. It requires that we study and explore the “complex, creative and dynamic process” of human learning before we can gain a more accurate picture and build bases for maximizing the educational experience of our students.¹⁹

The good news is that the assessment movement has already recognized the need for change. It former preoccupation with documenting performance has been replaced by an emphasis on assessment as a means of improving student learning. Under traditional or old style assessment, grades and scores were the measures of success but student learning assessment focuses on continuous improvement. It is interested in the *process* of learning, not the *products* of learning. Educational institutions are being urged to renew their commitment to teaching and learning. To foster this effort, administrators are urged to create a “culture of assessment” on their campuses. This image of assessment as a “culture” is not intended to connote images of throat swabs, petri dishes and clinical laboratories as it may have been the case under a modernist model. Instead, “culture” in this context means creating a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices with an overall mission of improving student learning. It is a call for higher education to return to its core mission and values.

This shift in the assessment movement is comparable to the changes taking place in today’s organizations. The values, practices and goals are strikingly similar. Student learning assessment stresses the importance of establishing core purposes and values, i.e. learning objectives; postmodern organizations focus on clear missions and core values. Stu-

dent learning assessment relies on continuous feedback to improve its processes; so does the postmodern organization. The logic of student learning assessment is the logic of the postmodern organization. They do not have competing or contradictory value systems. Both are open, inquiry-based, problem-solving systems that value multiplicity, thoughtful reflection, and exploration.

Organizing principles

A central theme in postmodernism is that the “premodern and modern continue to exist side by side” with newly emerging structures, viewpoints and attitudes. Library assessment programs will be no different. Postmodern assessment will include traditional or “scientific” methods and tools just as postmodern organizations contain modernist structures and practices. However, the conceptual framework that underlies our assessment efforts should be essentially postmodern in orientation. Our organizational and individual assumptions about the nature of reality form what Ralph Wolff calls our “organizing principles.”²⁰ These principles refer to the values and mental models that shape our thinking and as a consequence, shape our environments. Organizing principles determine what questions are asked and how success and quality are defined and measured. In libraries, the organizing principles and indicators of quality have shifted over time. Expanding on the work of Charles Martell, Wolff provides the following time frame and values:²¹

Time Frame	Values or Paradigm
Before 1980	Resources or Holdings
1980	Access
1995	Use (Students)
2010	Learning Transformation

A library that organizes itself around learning looks and behaves differently than a library that is organized around access or students. A focus on learning as an ultimate goal changes organizational priorities, quality indicators and assessment programs.

When learning is the organizing principle of an organization, assessment becomes an integral part of daily operations. It is assimilated into the daily work of each staff member. Assessment is no longer viewed as an externally imposed chore or a detour from normal routines. It becomes a self-organizing principle and helps create an organizational climate that encourages inquiry, exploration and reflection. We become full participants in the learning process, not mere observers.

Ultimately, the results of the assessment projects we undertake may not be as valuable to the postmodern library as the impact of the process itself. It is the process itself that transforms organizational culture and leads to the creation of a true learning organization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me close with three key concepts that are of critical importance to the future health and well-being of the postmodern academic library.

1. Diffuse boundaries, clear missions.

Postmodern libraries need open and flexible boundaries in order to quickly react to the demands of an ever-changing environment. However, if libraries are to also withstand the powerful outside forces that such open boundaries unleash, they must have a clear sense of mission. An unambiguous statement of purpose and values distills and clarifies what the library does well and therefore what it should be doing in many different settings. According to Bergquist, there is no more important – or difficult – task for leaders than defining the guiding mission and purposes of the postmodern institution.²²

2. From analysis to synthesis, from control to integration.

In an environment of unpredictable and turbulent change, we need to embrace different attitudes about organizational life and leadership.²³ In addition to accepting the realities of the postmodern condition – i.e. constant change, ambiguity, fragmentation – our reliance on analysis (breaking things into parts) must give way to *synthesis* (looking at the whole).²⁴ From a synthetic or holistic point of view, the key features of an organization are not its constituent parts but its relationships (internal and external), sense of community, partnerships, and collaborations. These *integrative* features are not just vital components of a healthy organization. According to Bergquist, they are the “new keys to leadership”.²⁵ Rather than seeking dominance and control, postmodern leaders need to focus on integration. These are the only strategies that will be effective in organizations best understood not as structures but as “complex, ongoing processes.”²⁶

3. Learning as the organizing principle

The newly emerging model of education moves beyond mastery of facts (although facts are still important) to include knowledge of interconnectedness, relationships, and self-awareness about the learning process itself.

Librarians need to heed Jessie Shera’s advice and become educators in the broadest sense of the word.²⁷ They

need to increase their understanding of the character of knowledge and learning, to identify behaviors, attitudes, environments, practices, and skills that maximize learning.²⁸ As academic libraries organize themselves around learning, they will become full partners in the educational mission of their institutions. To quote Archibald MacLeish,

"I do not believe that libraries, any more than any other institution created by men, can be set above change; that librarianship, like every other human activity, must be continuously reinvented if it is to live; and that none, or so it seems to me, is under heavier responsibilities to the present than those who profession is to conserve the past."²⁹

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984).
2. William Bergquist, *The Postmodern Organization: Mastering the Art of Irreversible Change*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), xv.
3. *The Truth about the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 4.
4. "Postmodernism," *The Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 1991 ed.
5. *The Truth about the Truth*, 8.
6. Based on Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty, (New York: Columbia University Pr.: 1993), 152.
7. Douglas Greenberg, "Camel Drivers and Gate Crashers: Quality Control in the Digital Library," *The Mirage of Continuity: Reconfiguring Academic Information Resources for the 21st Century*, eds. Brian L. Hawkins and Patricia Battin, (Washington D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 1998): 108.
8. Arlene G. Taylor, "The Information Universe: Will We Have Chaos or Control?" *American Libraries* 25 (1994): 632.
9. Greenberg, 106.
10. Bergquist, xiii.
11. *Ibid.*, 122-24.
12. *Ibid.*, 173-254.
13. *Ibid.*, 90.
14. *Ibid.*, 7.
15. *Ibid.*, xv.
16. Ronald F. Dow, "Using Assessment Criteria to Determine Library Quality," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 24 (1998), 277; *Assessment in Practice*, ed. Trudy Banta, et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), xvii.
17. Dow, 277.
18. Ralph A. Wolff, "Using the Accreditation Process to Transform the Mission of the Library," *New Directions for Higher Education* 90 (1995): 81.
19. *Assessment in Practice*, 10.
20. Wolff, 79.
21. *Ibid.*, 83.
22. Bergquist, 76, 91-2.
23. *Ibid.*, 249.
24. *Ibid.*, 249.
25. *Ibid.*, 13.
26. *Ibid.*, 242.
27. Jessie H. Shera, *Knowing Books and Men; Knowing Computers, Too*, (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited: 1973): 120.
28. Wolff, 88.
29. Quoted in Shera, 120.