Book It to Your Local Library: Public Libraries as Activity Systems

Izzy Foltz

In this article, Izzy Foltz investigates the multimodality of public libraries and how the associated activity systems have changed over time.

When I was a kid, I spent a LOT of time at the library. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the library was air-conditioned and my house wasn't, but I was more than happy to spend my summer days sitting on the floor next to the shelves on the second floor. I was ecstatic when I was old enough to walk to the library on my own because it meant my mom wasn't there to set a limit on how many books I was allowed to check out at a time. For a long time, that's all the library was for me: access to books (and air-conditioning!).

Last summer, I got a part-time job at that same local library (Figure 1), and it opened my eyes to how libraries are growing and changing beyond society's preconceived notions of them. I found that my local library is not just books, movies, and CDs, but also summer reading programs, after-school activities, book clubs, and board meetings; this is all for a library in a town of only 1,500 people. As our small-town library finally has the funds to expand, we will soon be able to offer even more than we could before, such as a dedicated children's section, more workspaces, and more natural

Figure 1: A picture of my childhood library, found on the library's
Facebook page.

lighting for our library. It was this plan for expanding my childhood public library that made me start thinking about libraries as activity systems and how those activity systems are changing over time.

Check It Out! Activity Systems and Public Libraries

The Illinois State University (ISU) Writing Program defines **activity systems** as "cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal." For a library, one goal is to serve as a community space and to make media, like books and movies, and library programs of all kinds accessible to the public. Although this is one goal that many libraries share, even the activity system focused on this goal is made up of smaller systems that are dependent on the individuals and communities that participate in them. To do this, the library has various tools and systems in place.

The first public lending library in the US was donated to a city in Massachusetts by Benjamin Franklin in 1790 ("First Public Libraries"). The city had asked him for a bell, but he thought they needed a library more ("First Public Libraries"). From the beginning, these kinds of libraries were open to the public, did not cost citizens additional money, and had a goal of serving the community ("First Public Libraries"). However, it is necessary to mention that while the introduction of libraries was a huge development in the US, they were primarily accessible to white, land-owning men. Since then, libraries have grown and changed to contain far more than just books and will continue to evolve as the world does, especially when it comes to inclusivity and accessibility.

Since the creation of the modern public library, libraries have continued to grow and change. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, public libraries

started to look like what many of us probably imagine when we think of libraries. Since then, libraries have continued to branch out in new and different ways to better serve their communities. This includes different types of resources, like DVDs, CDs, audiobooks, and sometimes even board/video games. Libraries also started working to provide Internet access for their communities and spaces for people to get together. Internet access in libraries has shown a huge increase since 1996, when only twenty-five percent of libraries provided Internet access (Bertot and Palmer).

Figure 2: Melvil Dewey created the Dewey Decimal System (a system used to categorize books in libraries) while working at the Amherst College library ("Dewey Decimal System Day"). This system has been in use since 1876 and is still the most commonly used system worldwide.

Before I discuss the different activities and activity systems that you can find in a modern-day library, I want to start with the most basic version of a library activity system: checking out a resource. For this system of activity, there are particular things that folks need to know and do in order to navigate the library and accomplish this goal. These are called **literacies**. These would include things like being able to find the book you want in the library, knowing how to check that book out, and finding out when to return it. For these processes, we may need some antecedent knowledge. **Antecedent knowledge** is prior knowledge that contributes to processes and texts (ISU Writing Program). In this process, this may be things like what kind of books we like, at least a loose grasp of the Dewey Decimal System (Figure 2), and possibly an understanding of the fines that may need to be paid if the book is turned in late. If we don't have this antecedent knowledge, there are also librarians who can help us to a certain extent. We can definitely help with the Dewey Decimal System. What books you would like? We'll give it our best shot! The literacies associated with libraries are what makes libraries accessible to community members.

Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover: It's Not Just Checking Out Books Anymore

What comes to mind when you think of a library? You might have this image of a big, quiet, dusty place with tons of books and an old lady whose whole job is to shush you if you breathe too loud. It seems boring, right? If you don't like to read (and in complete silence), why would you ever go there?

Well, I'm sitting in ISU's Milner Library as I write this. Although it is not a perfect example since it is not a public library, I can see people doing

Figure 3: A flyer made by Milner Library advertising some of
their programming.

all kinds of different activities around here. When thinking of libraries,
"multimodal" may not be the first word to come to mind. Many people tend
to think that libraries are just for books, but step into Milner Library on nearly
any day of the week, and you will see a testament to the multimodality of
libraries today. Someone at a nearby table is eating lunch. There are lots of
people typing on their computers. My friends are next to me playing a board
game they brought, and another group across the room is playing hangman
on one of the whiteboards. Loads of people are talking, but I genuinely don't
see anyone reading. And this is just my line of sight on one floor out of six! I
actually can't even see a bookshelf from where I'm sitting, although I know
they're there. So, while the stereotype of librarians hovering over patrons
saying, "Shush, read your book!" may have been the case at one point, it
clearly isn't now. **Multimodality** makes use of all the different forms of
communication that people are capable of (ISU Writing Program), and it
is engrained in libraries today to the point that the idea of a library with
only books seems extremely outdated. If we think back to the goals of the
people who were instrumental in developing libraries to "promote the public
good" ("Public Libraries in North America"), we can still fit these activities

and activity systems into that goal if we expand our definition of what kinds of activities help shape and create communities.
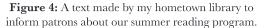
Working at my hometown library, I, of course, had patrons come in for books (there was one patron who would request upwards of six or seven books nearly every week!), but that wasn't all we did. At the library, we frequently help people with printing, copying, faxing, sending E-mails, and finding information online. Our library is also used as a space for book club meetings, and when I work at the front desk, I can hear them laughing from upstairs. In the summer, our children's librarian hosts weekly summer reading programs (Figure 4), in which she takes the children out to experience something in the community and then brings them back and they read together.

These are all reasons why the focus on libraries is shifting from what libraries *have* to what libraries *do* (Agosto). Your public library *has* books. It *has* movies. We know this. But, have you spent time looking into what your local library *does*? That's where we start to think about libraries as activity systems.

What Makes up a Library?

There are many moving parts in a library's various activity systems. Each part is incredibly important to keeping the library functioning and moving toward its goals. This includes the structure itself. Like my childhood library with its air-conditioning (seriously, my house gets *way* too hot in the summer), the building itself can be enough to draw patrons in and provide what they need. It may offer shelter from the heat, snow, and rain. It is also a safe space for those without safe homes or any home at all. The library is somewhere people can spend time without spending money, making it a perfect place for people without any other place to go to spend the day. This is how the physical building of the library helps to achieve the goal of the activity system, to provide space for community members who need it.

Figure 4: A text made by my hometown library to inform patrons about our summer reading program.

There are also library-specific tools that often connect them to other libraries and patrons potentially outside their own community. These are systems like the Internet, interlibrary loaning systems, and organizations like Libby and OverDrive that provide audiobooks and eBooks to patrons. In this way, libraries make their content accessible to patrons of all kinds. As my hometown library continues work on construction and expansion, we are growing to rely more and more on interlibrary loans. Having access to other libraries and texts makes a huge difference to the patrons of our rural community.

These resources don't even consider the many other resources that can be checked out of various libraries. There are books—we know this—but also movies, DVDs, CDs, and magazines. Some libraries loan out video games and consoles. My own library loaned out ukuleles for some time. If there is something you really want to check out, there is probably a library somewhere that has it. That's part of what makes libraries so powerful: they aim to get tools and knowledge into the patrons' hands.

However, the most important part of a library's activity system is the people. This includes the patrons, the community, the librarians, and anyone else who comes into the library. The librarians make sure that the library is functioning the way that it should be. They are often the ones producing the texts on behalf of the library and reaching out to the community. Ideally, the community will provide support to its library. The public library should be supported by and work with other institutions in the community to provide the best access and content to its patrons. The patrons are arguably the most important part of the activity system. They are the ones that we're doing this work for. We want people to come in. We want people to be comfortable and find what they need, and that's why they are so important. They represent the goals of a public library.

Circulation of Library Texts

As part of the goal to support patrons and provide a community space, there are many texts created within and on behalf of the library. Within the library, we leave each other notes, while we're on the phone or otherwise, to communicate. We create tally sheets to track the number of patrons and books checked out. We fill out order requests. And we have another incredibly important tool: what I call *The Binder of Everything*. All of these are important texts for the library, but *The Binder of Everything* has saved my life more times than I can count.

The Binder of Everything was created by the librarian who retired before I started working there. It lays out the steps for nearly every process that the librarians or desk clerks need to complete to run the library. Each process is carefully typed and labeled in a very detailed way. Each page is in a plastic protector. This text was made by a former librarian specifically for the benefit of future librarians at that library.

However, not all of a library's texts are made exclusively for workers within the library. The library also produces texts like flyers, social media posts, news articles, and itineraries for children's programming. None of the library's texts are technically "exclusive," but we do create them for specific members of the community. The texts can change based on whether they are intended for children, senior citizens, parents, teens, or any other subgroup of the community.

My hometown library uses Canva, a free, online visual design tool, to create flyers and social media posts. The librarians need to learn to use the program, create the texts on the computer, and then either print them out or upload them to the library's social media profiles. Our patrons can then take up these texts and hopefully come check out the events at the library!

Libraries as Community

What does a library mean to the community? I think a lot about the boy who came off the bus every day and went straight to the computer to play Roblox until his mom called the library to tell me to send him home. I think about the patron who asked me to teach him how to copy and paste something into an E-mail. I think about the people who ask me for book recommendations. I don't know how to tell them that my weird niche is fantasy books about queer pirates, so I don't know nearly enough about mainstream adult fiction to recommend them anything with authority. I do tell them which cover I think is the coolest because I do judge books by their covers. Ultimately, I think that a library is less about the books and more about the community.

What does the community mean to a library? My hometown library would be a great example of this. My community of 1,500 people in a rural Illinois town worked to raise over a million dollars in support of their library. They sent their dollars to us and reached out to neighboring communities so that we could create a community space for them, and we will.

The Future of Libraries

The activity systems of libraries have certainly changed over time. Over the course of my life, I have seen them change, and they will continue to adapt to our advancing world. The libraries of the current day will soon seem out-of-date as libraries continue to grow and expand, and not just when it comes to books. Not even just when it comes to checking out media. Libraries are morphing to become community spaces in their own right, where people can work, study, or just spend time. The next time you're at the library, pause, take a look around, and consider how far the activity system has come. Also, enjoy that sweet, cold air-conditioning on hot summer days!

Works Cited

Agosto, Denise E. "Hey! The Library Is Kind of Awesome! Current Trends in US Public Library Services for Teens." *Public Libraries Online*. Public Library Association, 29 Nov. 2016, publiclibrariesonline.org /2016/11/hey-the-library-is-kind-of-awesome-current-trends-in -us-public-library-services-for-teens/.

Bertot, John, and Kara Palmer. "US Public Libraries Provide Access to Computers, the Internet, and Technology Training." *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*, www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/media-center/press -releases/2005/06/support-needed-for-library-technology.

"Dewey Decimal System Day – December 10, 2023." *National Today*, nationaltoday.com/dewey-decimal-system-day/.

"First Public Libraries." *A History of US Public Libraries*. DPLA, dp.la /exhibitions/history-us-public-libraries/beginnings/first-public -libraries.

ISU Writing Program. "Key Terms and Concepts." *Grassroots Writing Research*. Illinois State University, isuwriting.com/key-terms.

"Public Libraries in North America." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_libraries_in_North_America.

Izzy Foltz graduated from ISU with a bachelor's degree in English studies in May 2023. They worked at Milner Library and plan to complete a Master's degree in library sciences. Aside from their love of libraries, Izzy enjoys playing Dungeons and Dragons and crafting!