How Can Researchers' Browsing Behaviors Inform Library Space (& Service!) Planning?

Sarah Pickle, Claremont Colleges Library
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Assignment: Study browsing behavior
It’s up to scholars to find the red thread.
But libraries can provide conditions that better facilitate browsing.
7,500 students
7 schools
Q: Why do researchers need unmediated access to our collections?

A: To browse.

What do we need to keep on the floor?

What environment & services do we need to provide?
Framing the project
In search of the unknown.
Approach, pt. 1

21 semi-structured 60-minute interviews

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Approach, pt. 1

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Approach, pt. 2

Key categories

• Keeping up with current scholarship
• Typical means of finding resources
• Browsing in person vs. online: impetus, frequency, value
• Decision-making while browsing
• Preferred browsing environments
• (Expectations for students)
Findings overview
Keeping up with current scholarship

- Journals: 15
- Talks/conferences: 6
- Networks & social media: 6
- Scholarly databases: 6
- Society/agency newsletters: 5
- News media: 5
Typical approach to finding resources

- Google Scholar or Google: 17
- Scholarly database: 14
- Library search: 9
- Books in stacks: 4
Everyone browses online. Who browses in person?

6 browse with any regularity, all arts and humanities.

Another 7 might browse once a year or less to get up to speed on a new topic.

All browse print with a purpose.
What are they looking for?

What do they need?

- Ability to easily search catalog while in stacks
- Big, sturdy table to stack books and spread out on *briefly* with notebook while *quickly* perusing
- Comfortable *soft seating*
- Decent lighting
Preferences & patterns
What are they looking for?

**In-person**
- Primary and secondary literature in humanities
- Framing literature (e.g., theory, methods)
- Foundational literature (e.g., overviews, handbooks, vetted reference)

**Online**
- Rarer primary sources in humanities
- Primary sources in other disciplines (e.g., data, case studies)
- Secondary literature
- Quick reference sources (e.g., Wikipedia)
- Thematic recommendations (e.g., via Amazon)
What are their thoughts on browsing in person?

**Positives**
- Easier to browse
- Quality control (of selection, of images)
- Feeling like a Scholar
- Opportunity for serendipity, creativity

**Negatives**
- Hard to browse…
  - thematically in humanities
  - small general-audience/teaching collections as a specialist
  - in a field you don’t know
- Inefficient
- Inability to search text
What are their thoughts on browsing online?

**Positives**
- Ease of
  - finding keywords
  - efficient searching
  - tracking citations
  - transporting and sharing
- Speed
- Volume, variety of text

**Negatives**
- Tech issues
  - with ILS
  - with link resolver
  - with platforms
  - with software
- Lack of quality control and selection
Emerging patterns

• Format of primary sources
• Need for foundational literature
• Speed of discipline
• Quality of library search for discipline
Emerging questions

• Do those who don’t browse our collection browse elsewhere?
• What are the limitations of our collection for browsing?
• What are faculty expectations for browsing prior to arriving at Claremont?
• Has the ease of digital storage and sharing supplanted the need to browse?
Why do people browse in person?

• Resources only available in print
• Tactile engagement and scanability
• Sense of submersion and participation in scholarly tradition
• Creative exercise
It is incumbent upon the researcher to do the creative work.
Even as we move books off the floor, what might we do to support better browsing?

- Keep primary sources on the floor
- Make more “efficient” information resources readily available in print
- Make online search more informative and browsable
- Represent electronic resources in physical spaces
- Allow researchers to assemble, organize, and display their own print collections out of our collections

“Active Print” collections
Next steps
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