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Did You Say Library Anxiety? (Part 1 & 2)

Marquita Harnett

University of New Mexico - School of Law

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"Did You Say Library Anxiety?" - Part One
by Marquita Harnett

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Most people are familiar with the terms test anxiety, math anxiety, performance anxiety, computer anxiety, or even social anxiety. But mention "library anxiety" and you'll likely get a response similar to, "Library what?" Library anxiety is not a well-known phenomenon, even among librarians. The bulk of research on library anxiety has concentrated on the problem as it applies to university students, but it's not hard to imagine that it manifests itself in library patrons across the board. Where did this idea come from, how can librarians identify it, what steps can be taken to reduce it and what can the library community learn from it?

Although it has been cited in the literature as far back as 1972 , the term library anxiety was first identified in 1986 by Constance A. Mellon. Virtually every article or study on the subject since then has referenced Mellon's work in this area. Her studies showed that most students felt that other students knew more about library searching than they did and that to ask for help would be to reveal their stupidity. She also found that contact with reference librarians was more effective in alleviating library anxiety than the bibliographic instruction sessions conducted by their teachers.

There are other names in the field such as Carol C. Kuhlthau, who found that students' ability to process information from the aspects of mental, creative and physical locating operations is hampered by their feelings, thoughts, and actions. In 1992, Sharon L. Bostick devised a valid and reliable instrument to measure Mellon's theory of library anxiety. The basis of her doctoral dissertation, she developed a 43 item, 5 point Likert-format test instrument that defines levels of library anxiety. Her instrument showed that it is possible to identify library anxiety and to measure it quantitatively. She identified five factors that contribute to library anxiety: 1) Affective Barriers; 2) Mechanical Barriers; 3) Comfort with the Library; 4) Knowledge of the Library; and 5) Barriers with staff.

"Affective barriers" measures the feelings of adequacy when using the library. As we will see, affective barriers come in to play with all of the other factors, each of which will be described in greater detail.

Mechanical Barriers: The ability to locate and use library equipment is hampered by the physical barriers libraries present. Students search for copy machines and upon locating them they learn that they need specific change to use them, or must purchase a copy card. Overuse of these machines results in the instructions being

worn and unreadable, or simply prone to breaking down. Printing documents from a computer in the lab means having to know how and where to retrieve the output, and how to pay for it. Microforms present problems in that many new college students don't understand what microforms are, how to use them, or which of the different types of machines should be used to access the microform. Consider that microfilm can be viewed by several different types of machine and the differences in how to load them. Instructions for using these machines may or may not be posted on or near the machine, and again overuse makes them prone to breaking down. Library equipment should be monitored by library staff to provide assistance to patrons who may feel uncomfortable asking for help.

Comfort with the Library: Library anxiety shows up as feelings such as fear or phobia, confusion, anger or frustration, having a sense of inadequacy or incompetence, overwhelm, isolation, ignorance, shame and feeling lost are all reported symptoms. Students get frustrated trying to locate the reserve desk, the circulation desk, where the government information department is, or how to find newspapers, or periodicals. Appropriately placed and easily viewed signs would allay many of these frustrations. An orientation panel containing a floor plan of the library and a map key for specific areas would also help orient patrons.

Library jargon is also responsible for causing discomfort with the library. It appears in signage, on informational handouts, on the library's webpage and in the catalog. Librarians understand that reference means "ask us a question about anything", but few students do. In fact, less than half of all students in a fifty-minute bibliographic instruction session held over three years knew what the term "reference" meant. University students often confuse "reference" with "reserve". Further, they don't realize there are print reserves and electronic reserves and don't know where or how to access either. Another area of confusion is the phrase "in library use" as found in the catalog. Patrons may believe that someone else is already using it in the library so they can't get it; or they try to check it out and find that it is non-circulating. Few students understand the difference between magazines and journals or that the term "periodical" encompasses both. Students have been seen walking past the circulation sign searching for the place to check out books. Databases offer "remote usage" for those patrons who wish to have access from home, however there is no explanation for what remote usage means, nor is there a detailed explanation of what is required in order to use a database remotely. Acronyms such as MLA, APA, ILL, etc. should be explained to students since it is unlikely that they will ask and risk feeling that they are asking a stupid question. Several universities, recognizing the confusion library terminology can cause, have published web pages of library glossaries, in order to avoid negative perceptions of the library.

Knowledge of the Library: The physical layout of the library can cause intimidation and confusion, and in a university library, the sheer size can be overwhelming. At the University of New Mexico the reference collection is located behind the reference desk, just inside the main doors. A common misconception of new students is that the reference collection is everything the library owns, not realizing that there are two additional upper floors and two floors below the main floor. This is understandable when you consider that a typical high school library is of similar size to a university reference collection. Seldom are incoming freshmen given a formal

tour of the main university library, or advised that other, more specialized libraries might exist on campus.

Library classification systems can also contribute to patron confusion and feelings of helplessness. Many incoming freshmen have never used the Library of Congress classification system. From kindergarten through high school their school libraries as well as their public libraries are generally organized according to the Dewey Decimal classification system. They don't understand the LC system or recognize that the call numbers begin with letters rather than numbers. Mellon relates an account of an incoming freshman who came to her for reference assistance asking her where she could find room 231. Mellon explained to the girl that the university library didn't have a room 231. The girl, visibly upset and frustrated declared that there must be a room 231 because the book she was looking for was in that room according to the catalog. Mellon asked the girl to show her where she got her information and realized that the girl was talking about the call number RM 231. When you throw into the mix the Su-Docs classification system for government information, students may attempt to reconcile the agency letter with an LC number, but frustration soon takes over and they give up.

Although most college students have grown up with some type of computerized catalog system, this is not necessarily the case of older patrons. Many are not familiar with the computerized catalogs that populate the majority of all libraries these days. OPAC's often have different interfaces, and the quantity and specificity of information varies greatly. The best OPAC's are clearly labeled, simple to use and provide detailed information as to how to find the requested item. Online databases also contribute to library anxiety. Like online catalogs, many databases have different interfaces making it necessary for patrons to be trained in how to use them. The strategies of broadening and narrowing searches, keyword searching versus subject searching, Boolean logic requires training. When a student is required to do research for perhaps one significant paper a year, it does not give them the time to develop proficiency in utilizing databases effectively. Although most databases offer help pages, the terminology is often ambiguous to new college students and can be confusing for young and older adults in public libraries. When an article is found in a database, few realize that it is merely an abstract of the article and will not provide the full-text of the article. In those cases, they must find out if their library carries the journal the article is in. Reference librarians experience students arriving at the reference desk with the name of the article and the journal title, feeling quite pleased that they understand the process, only to be told they also need the date, the volume number and the page numbers to find the article they need.

Staff Barriers: The library user's first impression upon entering any library should be welcoming, and reference librarians can have the biggest impact on library patrons, as they are usually the first point of contact upon entering the library. It can be argued that the brunt of the responsibility for a patron's positive or negative library experience falls to us. Approachability issues include both verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication includes the use of library jargon and the degree of skill with the reference interview. Positive, non-verbal communication exhibits itself through certain behaviors such as raised eyebrows, eye contact, nodding, and smiling. These have been found to attract a large number of patrons.

Indeed the literature is rife with recommendations that reference personnel employ approachable body language in order to attract patron's questions, especially eye contact and smiling. Further, as Mellon's research indicated, there is a fear that any question for reference staff may be considered stupid, or the patron is simply reluctant to bother the librarian. Although few librarians would want their patrons to feel this way, it has been argued that this message must be getting through to users, either through wording or action. Librarians should have the ability to read both nonverbal and verbal cues of the student, and they should also be aware of the cues they are sending. Reference librarians may feel they don't have the time to answer questions adequately due to other patrons waiting in line. Staff rotation on the reference desk creates inconsistency when the patron returns for further questions, only to find the librarian they had consulted with earlier has now gone. Skilled reference interview techniques are required because patrons not only have difficulty specifying the information they want, they often can not explain what they don't know. Although one desired outcome of a reference interaction is to enable the user to transfer what is learned from the interaction into a new situation, an equally important outcome is for the user to read librarian's signals as "I'm here to help you" rather than "I'm too busy".

These are just a few cited examples of the myriad ways patrons feel intimidated by the library as place. In the second part of this article we will see what we as librarians can learn from the study of library anxiety.

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"Did You Say Library Anxiety?" - Part Two by Marquita Harnett

The discussion thus far has centered on some of the barriers that contribute to library anxiety. What are librarians learning from the study of this pervasive problem? The literature suggests that library anxiety impacts academic success or failure through learning styles and behavior anomalies. In addition, studies are showing how library anxiety is teaching librarians that best practices exist for areas such as bibliographic instruction.

Graduate students and undergraduates alike experience library anxiety. Qun G. Jiao and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie have conducted numerous studies on this subject and found that certain behavior anomalies are linked to library anxiety, such as perfectionism and academic procrastination. It has been concluded that for socially prescribed perfectionists, the library is a threat for them and there exists a relationship between perfectionism and library anxiety . This is also consistent with the results of Mellon's study which reported that library anxious students feel that only they are inept at using the library while other students do not experience the same problems, and that this ineptness is a source of embarrassment and should be kept secret. These feelings result in a reluctance to seek help from librarians fearing that their ignorance will be exposed. In turn this anxiety, in all likelihood, leads to library avoidance.

Library avoidance behavior has also been found in the phenomena of academic procrastination. Fear of failure and task aversion resulting in procrastination has been found to be related to barriers with staff, affective barriers, comfort with the library, and knowledge of the library. Although it is unclear whether this is a causal relationship, it provides evidence that there are more than just time management and study skill issues involved, but includes cognitive-affective components.

These are only two examples of behavior anomalies shown to be linked to library anxiety. The broader perspective here is that library anxiety can lead to scholastic underachievement in students who are nervous about seeking help from a librarian and therefore tend to produce lower quality work. Constance Mellon's groundbreaking work in 1986 was the first to not only identify library anxiety, but to discover how it affects the learning process. While designing an instruction program, she discovered that anxiety students felt about the research process was considerably lessened after contact with a librarian. She then developed exercises to be done in the library and added information into these sessions about the phenomena of library anxiety assuring students that is was a common occurrence. She realized that if anxiety is present, steps must be taken to allay it before instruction can take place. Although computer based tutorials are helpful, it appears

that they are best utilized in conjunction with a librarian led bibliographic instruction. These sessions allow the student to make contact with librarians and require them to be in the library and become more familiar with the library surroundings. Online tutorials can be completed from any computer making it easy for students to completely avoid the library, which is counter-productive. The obvious conclusion is that the role of the librarian in relieving library anxiety is crucial and should not be overlooked.

There are countless articles on best practices for how to allay this problem in patrons as well as considerable literature on outreach. It seems clear that outreach must be consciously practiced from the most simple and mundane interactions to broad library programs in order to help patrons overcome their fear. During bibliographic instruction sessions which generally last anywhere from fifty minutes to an hour, the first five minutes are crucial to set a positive tone of interaction between student and librarian. Presentations should be well organized, interesting and should not attempt to cover too much ground in too short a time. Most researchers agree that it is important to acknowledge the fear, confusion or sense of dread students experience, and to talk about it openly, assuring students they are not alone in their feelings. Recommendations are bountiful with regard to reference interview situations. Initially the reference librarian should make eye contact and smile. Put aside any work in order for the patron to see that you are ready and willing to help. The librarian should ask open-ended questions. Making assumptions indicates to the patron that you are rushing the interview and are not listening patiently. Always engage the patron in conversation by explaining what you are doing and why you are doing it during the search process. This establishes a rapport with the patron, helps them understand that you are concentrating your efforts on the question at hand, and also may help them learn more about how to conduct their own searches. It is also important to check back later with the patron, again indicating your willingness to help, and not leaving them in a potentially confused state.

The problem of library anxiety reaches into every aspect of the library, can affect individual learning styles, can exacerbate certain behavior anomalies, and is known to result in underachievement. It has been shown that contact with reference librarians can significantly decrease the levels of library anxiety in students. Library anxiety manifests itself through a variety of fears, feelings of overwhelm and avoidance. It is up to the reference librarian staff to address students' anxiety in the library through multivariate outreach methods. The primary opportunity for this to happen is during the reference interview and through bibliographic instruction sessions.

Although Mellon, Kuhlthau and Bostick have provided benchmark studies from which to study library anxiety, probably no one has studied this topic as extensively or from so many perspectives as Qun G. Jiao and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie. They have contributed no less than thirteen articles consisting of quantitative studies, and they have recently co-authored a book with Sharon Bostick on the subject .

The phenomenon of library anxiety often produces giggles in non-library circles, and bewilderment in our own profession. Yet it is an important topic and we, as librarians, should know what signs to look for and should be prepared to aggressively combat

it. Library avoidance, academic underachievement and procrastination will undermine the work we do, and is in opposition to our ideals of information literacy, promoting library use, and producing life long learners.

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