

Back Talk — Library Patrons: Continuity and “Hello, I Think This Is A New World”

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420)
<ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>



Recently, at the **University of Hong Kong**, we “pushed” an online patron needs survey to all members of the University community. We got a nice return of more than 2,000 responses and a team of librarians is now analyzing the quantitative data — but I decided I couldn’t wait to read the sixty-nine single-spaced narrative comments typed into “comment” boxes in the survey. As a North American I can’t help but always being interested in how Hong Kong students and teachers are similar to or different from those at North American universities. I thought you might find their responses interesting as well.

After breaking their comments into topic related bits and alphabetically resorting these bits into subject lists, one six-page list ended up being “compliments,” or rather, nice words which reassure me and everyone else on the staff that our efforts are worthwhile. Here are a few examples:

- “All in all, the **HKU Main Library** has done sterling service to staff and students of **HKU** as well as other local universities and researchers from outside **HKU**. I’m very appreciative of the effort of the staff and the support of the university to develop the **HKU Main Library** to its current standard and its continual upgrading. Keep up the good work!”
- “As compared with other resourceful libraries in Europe or in the States, I find our librarians extremely helpful and efficient, I am proud of them and of our library. I sincerely hope that our librarians won’t be taken for granted and their commitment will be respected.”
- “**HKUL** is a great library with dedicated staff and providing lots of help and world-class resources.”
- “I have worked in libraries all over Europe (including the **British Library** and the **Bibliothèque nationale**), and I have to say that I am pleasantly surprised concerning how well equipped the **HKU library** is. The staff is incredibly friendly, questions and requests are answered promptly, interlibrary loans and purchase suggestions are dealt with immediately.”

Many of the lists, however, contained complaints only all too familiar — complaints about problems not easily resolved due to human nature and budgetary limitations (the first few comments are exact quotes, the rest summarize the complaint):

- “A lot of students write in the books. I know it’s the students’ fault but [can’t] the

library do anything to check and warn the students who have this bad habit?”

- “The air-condition is not adequate, usually it is too warm” and “The air-conditioning is too cold. I normally sit on the 2nd floor, and I suggest the temperature be maintained at 24 C. Please take this suggestion seriously.”
- “I am disappointed to see one of your messages in your computers telling users to only switch their mobile phones to vibrate instead of turning them off completely . . . What the library should do is step up its enforcement of the mobile phone off rule. This is a library, not a commons area, and people who come in do so for specific reasons, none of which is to chat on their phones.”
- “I don’t understand why children can enter the library and [why]they keep crying. I [don’t] think the child is [a] **HKU** student and [has] no right to use our library.”
- Stop people from talking.
- The toilets aren’t clean enough, and the lights are too bright or too dim.
- You need more books and journals on subjects X, Y, and Z.
- We need more and better copy machines, microfilm readers, etc.
- The lines at circulation counters are too long, the staff are snippy, and please send me a warning email (actually we do this) before fining me.
- Speed up interlibrary loan.
- Shelve the books faster, stop students from hiding books, get the books in better order, and stop the shelving crew from talking.
- Open the libraries earlier and keep them open later, more weekend hours, and don’t close them on holidays.
- Get rid of **Dewey** — call numbers like 371.9510125 are too long.

While these comments are painfully familiar, others reminded me that this is a new digital world with new problems and new sets of expectations:

- I don’t know what databases are suitable for me . . . there are so many!
- I have the general impression that the library is getting gradually more difficult to use. The catalogs are a mess with multiple entries for e-journals in particular.
- Abstracts of articles are not good enough — we need more full text.

- I want to look at these online.
- You need more e-journal backruns
- It is too slow when I read e-journals from home.
- You have so many eBook collections and their interfaces are all different.
- Make the catalog more like **Amazon.com**.
- Put descriptions of databases online [we do somewhat].
- Too many broken links to Websites.
- Too many clicks are required to view my circulation record [we require users to authenticate].
- [an alum complained] I want access to all the databases, not just the ones to which **Circle of Friends** organization members are entitled.
- Three color copies made from e-journals are not as good as the printed journals.

The first two of these complaints express the difficulties that many of our users are experiencing with their digital library. When there were mainly printed books and a few electronic databases we were all excited. Now that we are buried in e-content, many users are drowning in digital ink. Having said that, an equally loud demand is for more digital ink in the form of more eBooks, more e-journals, more e-journal back runs, etc. Other complaints refer to simple, but still frustrating, technical problems: I need a better mouse, my bandwidth is too slow, your catalog isn’t nice like **Amazon.com**’s, I hate broken links, and the color copies aren’t good enough. Since we developed an e-package for alumni access [titles for which licensing permission has been secured], we have received numerous complaints that we have disenfranchised them compared to the access they enjoyed as students. Many of these problems can be solved, but they result in some patrons feeling like the one who simply stated: “I feel frustrated all the time.”

Some of the other complaints reflect the new level of expectations that the current Web generation, steeped in instant gratification, possess:

- I want the catalog to tell me what floor, row, and shelf my book is on.
- Translate western European books into English.
- Why can’t your Hong Kong materials catalog include references to materials at

continued on page 93

Back Talk

from page 94

the Public Records Office, the Historical Museum, etc.?

- You need to catalog all the articles in anthologies, catalog all the titles in e-journal databases [we do mostly].
- You pick up and deliver books from libraries at other universities, why not from other branch libraries on our own campus? I don't want to have to come to campus to return my books, please set up return boxes at all the extension centers in the city.

Twenty-five years ago I would complain that students simply wanted to know where the pencil sharpener, drinking fountain, and rest rooms were - but this generation seems to have higher expectations (in addition to drinking fountains and rest rooms). The last comment in the list just above relates to another phenomena in higher education today: More life long learners who have personal needs that conflict with library rules. They come into our library after 9 PM at night once classes are over, rush around gathering books and making photocopies to supplement what they find online, but subsequently are emailed that they need to return a book or get fined — and that is not a day on which they have a class. A student's life is simply not easy.

So, are Hong Kong students different in their library demands? I don't think so. Globalism produced our collection of skyscrapers amidst green mountains and the lives of our students are quite similar to those of their counter parts on the other side of the Pacific. The survey also suggests that while many of the problems encountered by students in libraries are the same as decades past, we are indeed already in the digital future. 