

Advancing the Effectiveness and Sustainability of Open Education Conference

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The Role of the Library in Open Education

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In 1931, when S. R. Ranganathan presented his Five Laws of Library Science, he envisioned libraries playing a vital role in education.⁶ Yet, as these principles have confronted modern technologies and the tendency of libraries to distance and isolate themselves from the larger educational environment, they have been significantly weakened.⁷ Libraries must be involved in the effort to advance and sustain open education. They should be at the forefront of providing open content to educators and students. But because they often believe this responsibility falls outside the scope of their profession, many librarians avoid it, leaving a noticeable gap between educators and students and the resources they need.

The Open Collections Program (OCP) of the Harvard University Library interprets Ranganathan more boldly. For the past three years, OCP has been an active participant in the creation of open educational content and in exploring and expanding the roles digital library collections can play in education. Through its marketing, outreach, and evaluation efforts, OCP works directly with educators and students at all levels. In this presentation, we will discuss and demonstrate our recent work in these critically important areas.

Ranganathan's five laws:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader, his book.
3. Every book, its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. A library is a growing organism.⁸

One of the founding principles behind OCP was that a collection isn't really open unless its resources can easily be accessed and navigated. This means, first and foremost, that users must know the collection exists. Many digital collections stop short of connecting their books with their potential readers, holding fast to the principle that if you build it, they will come. But will they? If librarians really believe "books are for use" (and that includes electronic books), they must be more active in promoting their collections. Marketing seems to be

unspeakable these days in libraries, as if librarians think self-promotion implies lower standards. But Ranganathan's laws demand marketing, or outreach, or public services—call it whatever you like, but libraries must be more aggressive in connecting their digital materials with their users.

The fourth law, "Save the time of the reader," requires librarians to organize their online content and provide context and navigation tools. Librarians often resist adding such features to their web sites, but these tools parallel the topical pathfinders they have been creating for years—the medium has changed, but the underlying idea has not. The more creative and prolific librarians become in designing materials to help users navigate their online collections, the more successfully they will bridge the gap between the library and education worlds.

Like all students, library users learn as they make sense of the texts, images, and objects they encounter and as they find relationships and create connections among them.⁹ Ranganathan called for librarians to make their collections known and available, and to help readers find relevant materials within them, even and especially when patrons "do not know enough about available resources to know what to request."¹⁰ "The majority of readers do not know their requirements, and their interests take a definite shape only after seeing and handling a well-arranged collection of books," he wrote.¹¹ He charged librarians to bring related books together—to arrange books in ways that would support the development of the reader's interests and questions.

We will demonstrate several new web pages through which OCP is responding to the needs of learners and offering theme-based access to its collections. As with the pathfinders librarians traditionally have created, themes are chosen based on the budding interests audiences bring to the collections. Items representing various genres are selected for their potential to help raise questions and start conversations when they are placed near one another. Additional selections, listed next to each featured item, draw the reader further into the collections. Links to individual items and to parts of the collections and embedded browse and search functions offer multiple paths into a broadening range of materials set in an increasingly complex web of relationships. The design of these new pathfinders is shaped by this belief: the more entryways librarians can provide to their collections, and the denser the networks of pathways they can suggest within them, the

richer visitors' experiences of the collections will be, and the richer the understandings each reader can develop from her interaction with them.

One of the greatest potential barriers to open education in the coming years may be the continued reluctance of libraries, particularly academic libraries, to share their resources more fully with all educators and students. Certain policies help to sustain this reluctance and this roadblock. Library administrators often argue that creating digital collections for use outside their own institutions, and providing navigation tools or reference support for outside users, is beyond their purview. But libraries are growing organisms. The Open Collections Program has set out to open Harvard's library collections to the world. Our intention is to create a model for the creation of digital library collections—a model that demonstrates the potential power in bringing once closed and hidden materials to educators and students around the world. When we envision how educators and students beyond Harvard might navigate these collections, for example, we are able to improve access for all visitors, creating collections that are more usable and more open to people both inside and outside the Harvard community.

Librarians have the potential to be important players in the world of open education, but they must expand the way they think about their collections, their users, and their profession.