Chapter 3

A Conversation Approach to Electronic Collections Development Within University Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Electronic collections development within university libraries is transforming university research and academic life. This case explores the topic of electronic collections development within university libraries from a student perspective. By mobilizing Conversation Theory (CT) and a conversational modeling framework, a case on electronic collections development is presented that utilizes research literature and focus group discussion data derived from undergraduate students within a large urban university. Findings reveal student perspectives and factors affecting students' stances towards current and future electronic collections development trends. In addition, the findings indicate a variety of conversation modeling strategies are used by students in fostering perspective sharing and mutual understanding about electronic collections development. This case sheds light on electronic collections development from a student perspective and offers recommendations on how to use conversation modeling to leverage mutual understanding and consensual decision-making in contexts where communication gaps surrounding technology and its use in society exist.

BACKGROUND: ELECTRONIC COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT WITHIN UNIVERSITY LIBARIES

Evaluating the success of large scale developments within organizations like universities is both necessary and difficult. It is necessary because of the limited time and limited amount of public resources available to invest in organizational change. It is difficult because of the complexity of the development itself (i.e., technical considerations, costs) and by the complexity of the social context (i.e., presence of different stakeholder groups, competing interests, knowledge, and communication gaps).

One particularly important large scale development within higher education revolves around library collections development trends. University libraries are core parts of most, if not all, universities and central to upholding university mandates to pursue excellence in academic research and university education. But what happens when shifts in publishing technology begin to transform university libraries and how they serve their users? Electronic collections are publications (e.g., monographs, edited books, journals) offered in electronic format (such as e-books and e-journals). More specifically, an e-book or e-journal within an electronic collection is a "text, in digital form, or a book converted into digital form, or digital reading material, or a book in a computer file format, or an electronic file of words and images displayed on a desktop, note-book computer, or portable device, or formatted for display on dedicated e-book readers" (Rao, 2003, p.86-7).

In 1971, Michael Hart pioneered the first major electronic book library (Project Gutenberg) as a small digital repository project. Now, less than forty years later, libraries around the world have large electronic collections as part of their regular library holdings. This represents a major technological and organizational shift within the publishing industry, as well as a shift in education and society. As stated by Rao (2003), "The e-book is the most important development in the world of literature since the Gutenberg press and is destined to change the reading habits of many over the next several years" (p.85). This technology-driven change is having a particularly strong influence on university library services, challenging the traditional roles of university libraries (and librarians) in keys areas including cataloguing, circulation, digital preservation, and user services. This is partly due to the complex relationship between stakeholder groups and new technologies (Nelson, 2008; Poftak, 2001). Connaway (2001) notes, "Perhaps the greatest challenge of the digital library is its dependency on strong alliances between publishers, authors, librarians and e-book providers. Together they will need to provide electronic content through new technologies and delivery systems to meet the increasing demands of technology-savvy users" (p.349). In examining the implications of e-books in academic libraries and how libraries must adapt to new technologies, Jantz (2001) indicates, "In this advancing digital library era, we are tantalizing our users by offering rapid access to digital sources and simultaneously frustrating them by not providing effective end-to-end processes that enable ease of use" (p.104).

Perhaps the biggest problem in reorienting university libraries for the technological society of the 21st century lies in providing information concerning user needs and making a business case for such an expenditure. This will be beneficial to the largest user group—the students. As stated by Hernon, Hopper, Leach, Saunders, and Zhang (2007), "Given the financial commitment that many libraries make to acquiring e-books and the need for evidence of use to justify the expenditures, it is important to study student preferences and changing information-gathering behaviours" (p.3). Furthermore, if students are unaware of the fact that these resources are offered, or do not know how to use them, perhaps it would be useful for the library to invest in campaigns to further educate students about information gathering techniques

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