

Beyond Analogue: The Learning Studio as a Media-Age Library

In his 2010 *Cognitive Surplus*, Clay Shirky signals a fundamental transition of our post-television age. He argues that media has become “the connective tissue of society.” No longer “something produced by professionals for consumption by amateurs” (54), the power of digital media is in moving culture beyond the one-way transmission of broadcasting to a two-way interaction where new ideas and ways of thinking emerge. The challenge for educators in the 21st century is in capturing this active role for our students and classrooms: “we have to rethink the basic concept of media: it’s not just something we consume, it’s something we use” (52).

This challenge is nowhere more evident than in library spaces. Mobile devices have created new ways of connecting and learning from others through images, audio, and video; our students come to us expecting to interact and collaborate in vital communities linked by new media messages. Though significant attention has been given to the transition from print to digital collections, the 21st-century library must attend to the participatory culture sparked by digital media and modes of thinking and working together.

In 2010 the Brown Library at Abilene Christian University opened the AT&T Learning Studio. In the last decade, library redesigns built around the information commons model attempted to move spaces beyond the analogue assumptions of the repository—curation and consumption—and connect the library to the world of the web, creating a kind of crossroads for information gathering of all sorts. The studio model takes an essential next step, seeing library spaces not only as sites of information literacy and analysis but also of production, collaboration, and a growing list of practices essential to learning in the 21st century.

Towards Media Fluency

One early voice in reframing education for the 21st century was the P21 project. In 2002 the US Department of Education founded the Partnership for 21st Century Skills with advocacy groups like the National Education Association and corporate support including Apple, Microsoft, and Time Warner. The Partnership for 21st Century

Skills, or P21, asked what core skills would need to complement knowledge in core subjects to allow students “to succeed as citizens and workers in the 21st century” (www.p21.org).

The Third Literacy

One thread that runs through the P21 framework is a renewed commitment to communication skills, old and new. Future graduates will continue to need a mastery of oral and written communication but should be ready to “utilize multiple media and technologies, and know how to judge their effectiveness. . . as well as assess their impact.” The learning studio model supports media authoring as a kind of “third literacy” to develop a new media fluency. More than information literacy, this fluency asks patrons to become media authors, producers, and participants in new modes of idea exchange.

Media support staff in the Learning Studio are available to coach students and faculty to not only learn to “read” media, understanding how it works and assessing its effective use, but also begin to “write” media, producing messages that contribute a point of view through strong audio, video, and imagery. Academic libraries have long offered this type of support in writing and speaking centers. If, as Shirky suggests, media authoring is no longer the province of specialists, then 21st-century libraries need spaces where students and educators from all disciplines can explore these new models.

For us, the transition from media consumers to producers or authors begins with photography. Image sharing is the cornerstone of social media—from Facebook to Instagram—and provides an easy starting place for anyone new to digital creation. Since 2010, the Learning Studio at ACU has found beginning and intermediate instruction in digital photography, introducing basic composition and exposure with shooting sessions and peer critiques, an effective first step in building not only skills but confidence in working with media. Our media labs also provide patrons access to advanced media editing software as well as checkout cameras, tripods, and lighting kits to enable self-directed learning.

As students and faculty become more comfortable working with images, they can move on to training in digital storytelling. Media authoring or storytelling introduces technical training—how to record

audio narration, scan images, and edit video—within the context of first-person narrative to increase investment in the process. Digital storytelling builds on the core skills of writing and speaking by beginning with a strong script and voice-over narration before adding the cinematic power of image and sound to produce a multimedia message.

Our initial workshops have moved naturally into the curriculum with teachers integrating digital storytelling strategies into a range of student media projects including literacy narratives for first-year writers, foreign language speaking exercises, public service announcements in nutrition, and product commercials in Intro to Business. Because faculty are first introduced to media production in the studio space, they have been eager to bring students back for initial training in software and storytelling skills as many produce their first media projects. Workshops with dozens of teachers have indirectly impacted hundreds of students in the last year.

Libraries and the Third Literacy

The role of the 21st-century library must be to envision media creation spaces that move beyond information literacy to media fluency. As new generations of readers and authors continue to blur the boundaries of writing, speech, and visual representation, the result will require multi-modal tools and rhetorics. Digital storytelling itself has already come to blend first-person narrative, remix videos, photo essays, stop-motion movies, machinima, mash-up audio into the broad category. This diversity of meanings is the product of students and faculty increasingly fluent in the building blocks of media culture.

Toward collaborative thinking

A second, and complementary, skill identified as essential to 21st-century learning and innovation is “working creatively with others.” Collaboration appears across the P21 framework, challenging students to contribute regularly to diverse teams and “assume shared responsibility for collaborative work and value the individual contributions made by each team member.”

Keith Sawyer emphasizes the power of collaboration in his book *Group Genius*: “We’re drawn to the image of the lone genius whose

mystical moment of insight changes the world. But the lone genius is a myth; instead, it's group genius that generates breakthrough innovation. When we collaborate, creativity unfolds across people; the sparks fly faster, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (7).

The learning studio model leverages the power of group genius. First, dynamic collaboration means that tools for idea formation and sharing have to be widely accessible. After looking at dozens of interactive technologies, we ended up covering every available surface with old-fashioned whiteboard: no training, no tech support, just lots of markers. Given access to over 1,400 square feet of whiteboard surface, students have developed new approaches to learning. The study of disciplines like biology, chemistry, Spanish and Greek that previously focused on individual memorization, now bring groups together to study in collaborative teams.

Mobile devices have also changed the way we think about computing. We began by asking how library spaces could be more hospitable to laptops and tablets and simplify the process of sharing content with groups. Our collaboration rooms feature Media:scape tables from Steelcase that enable instantaneous screen sharing and idea exchange. Each table allows up to 6 students to connect laptops or tablets and mirror their screen on large LCD displays at the table as the conversation takes an unexpected turn. In other collaborative rooms where we installed computers behind the LCD screen, the only technology on the table is a bluetooth keyboard and mouse allowing participants to quickly hand off control of discussion mid-stream.

As new wireless projection tools come online, the age of cables and adapters is coming to an end. Future collaborative spaces will move beyond these choices between analogue and digital tools, allowing groups to move ideas from physical spaces into digital research portfolios where they can continue to be refined. Digital media produced by patrons should just as easily be shared on a convenient display or surface. Work created by patrons should also flow into institutional repositories, becoming not simply a part of the collection but of conversations that reach across disciplinary and institutional boundaries.

Support for advanced users

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills has focused most of its attention on kick-starting a national conversation around K-12 education. As such, it is not surprising that many of its outcomes involve basic literacies, not only writing and speaking but civic, economic, environmental, and health literacies as well.

There is no question that students working in the future will need these foundational literacies in working with an abundance of information, technology and communication tools, and digital media. A growing number of new students and faculty come to us with these foundations already and need a place to develop advanced skills and explore more complex tools.

The Learning Studio at ACU has continued to watch emerging trends in the media landscape with implications for the next generation of authors and producers. Mobile devices have brought improved optics and HD quality video to the general consumer and our students are leveraging tools once available to only professionals everyday. However, we also provide workshops in advanced lighting, sound, and DSLR cameras in our checkout pool to push those users wanting to do more with advanced editing software in our labs. The explosion of mobile media has sparked a growing interest in professional tools globally as well; in 2012 Google announced its first two physical studios for YouTube creators in London and Los Angeles.

Providing advanced media training may require strategic partnerships across the campus or community. We have worked with campus film and photography competitions that challenge students to create work beyond the bounds of a class or assignment. If media production is no longer the work of a single department or major, student projects underway in the learning studio are no longer confined to the curriculum. Where possible, we have also brought experts to campus to lead training workshops and facilitator training to continue to build expertise within the library for the future.

Serving advanced and beginning users requires access to specialized tools housed in flexible spaces. We designed studio rooms with acoustic treatments for recording basic podcasts and interviews but extended them by 6 feet on one end to allow them to

serve students wanting to film practice speeches and presentations. When we designed the main HD studio space for advanced projects, we avoided investing in fixed lighting grids or equipment that could only be used in one room in the library. Curtains and green screens were also hung to be quickly used or stored based on the needs of the project. The flexibility of the main studio allows media production specialists to work with students on photographic lighting training then with faculty developing open educational resources in the same afternoon.

Building a Coral Reef

Legitimate objections can be raised against the total transformation of library spaces into specialized zones that serve niche uses. With efficient scheduling, the physical recording and editing spaces that now occupy 8,800 square feet upstairs in the ACU library might have been cobbled together from storage rooms in the basement. However, the Learning Studio facility embodies broader institutional commitments to the role of creativity, innovation, and collaboration in 21st-century learning.

In *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Steven Johnson argues that the explosion of life and creativity reflected in the city, the coffeehouse, and the coral reef are directly tied to their unique traits: “What kind of environment creates good ideas? The simplest way to answer it is this: innovative environments are better at helping their inhabitants explore the adjacent possible, because they expose a wide and diverse sample of spare parts—mechanical or conceptual—and they encourage novel ways of recombining those parts” (41).

For Johnson the “adjacent possible” is a moment of serendipity when someone sees a new connection between two previously known ideas. In its transition from repository to studio, the 21st-century library creates a vibrant ecosystem where new life is built out of the old. The foundations of writing and speaking are essential to new rhetorics of media authoring. Collaborative spaces bring together the best analogue and digital tools. And ideas, ancient and modern, are consumed and recombined in a range of media. In this way, the library continues to be the crossroads of the adjacent possible, where the past and future meet.

Works Cited

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