

Playing for Keeps: Lifelong Learning in the Ludic Library

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Abstract: We take information literacy seriously, yet in a sense, the best researchers are playful. How might concepts of play inform our practice in libraries made for learning? What if we reconceptualized research from the systematic acquisition and use of intellectual property to a more creative and open approach to engaging with ideas in motion? What does it mean to be information literate in a world in which "publish" is a button?

When Linda first told me about this conference, it seemed clear that having fun was a priority. I'm all in favor of that! It also seemed clear to me that you all are used to taking charge of your own learning and making it engaging and even joyful, which makes sense. As librarians, we know that learning *is* fun, except when it isn't – and when it isn't fun, there's a good chance it isn't learning that will stick. However, we are culturally conditioned to think "fun" is the opposite of "hard work" or "achievement." Work is productive, and therefore virtuous; fun is considered non-productive, frivolous, undignified. We have to resort to verbal disguises when we promote it as a feature of effective teaching and learning. The euphemism most often used to smuggle fun into a serious discussion of student learning is "engagement." Engagement is good. It's even fun – but it's a more dignified word and helps us avoid being told we're dumbing things down suggesting that good research isn't hard work.

I thought I'd start with a couple of stories, two different narratives about doing research. One is part of my own literacy narrative. When I was in college, I was one of those nerdy kids who would tear through a syllabus to find out what kind of paper we got to write. I actually enjoyed writing papers, at least after the first year, once I got requirements out of the way. (General education is so wasted on the young.) It turns out if you like reading novels and writing papers, it's a fine idea to major in Russian literature, which I stumbled into almost randomly. I never got very good at Russian grammar and syntax, but I got to read a lot of big fat novels in translation, my idea of a good time. In my junior year, though, I hit a snag. For the first time, I was paralyzed, staring at a blank page. I was taking a course on the works of Tolstoi and Dostoevsky (yay, lots of fat novels!) The teacher, who specialized in Dostoevsky, was chronologically framing his development as a novelist. When he got to *The Idiot*, he pretty much skipped over it, saying he really didn't get that novel, he couldn't see how it fit into his body of work, and since it didn't make sense to him, he just didn't *like* it. After class I went up and told him *he* was an idiot, that in fact it was the best of Dostoevsky's novels, and was the key to his work. He said "great, you can explain it to me in your paper."

It was on. I was going to set him straight, once and for all. Unfortunately, while I was certain the novel was full of meaning, I wasn't actually sure what that meaning was. And I had a really hard time knowing how to start. I looked at everything I could find in the library on the novel (missing most of it, because I was not even remotely information literate) but it didn't help. I stared at the book and the blank page

and the calendar and finally started, because I was running out of time. And the minute I started writing, I found the key to the whole thing. It was all in a painting that was mentioned several times in the novel. And it flowed. It flowed, because I was so deeply invested in saying something that hadn't been said before. It flowed because making a case for the novel mattered to me. And it was intoxicating, at least until I had to type the darned thing up, with a bucket of white out at my side. Some of us are old enough to know what "white out" is. The rest of you – count your blessings that you don't.

That was an exhilarating experience. Even though I enjoyed writing papers, this one was different. It mattered in a way nothing else had. And when the teacher told me it gave him a new respect for the novel, and a new way to think about it, that reward meant far more than a grade.

That was fun. Er, I was *really* engaged.

Now I'll tell you another story about doing research. This is a story told in a video advertising a really [clever product](#). I almost hate to bring it up, because it really is a nifty tech tool, but it was developed with some misperceptions so profound that it pains me. This is the story of research as told by its creators.

"Naturally, we strive to achieve our dreams," the video starts out, with cheerful, uplifting music. "But life is downright hectic. You have all of your classes, each assigning books, papers and projects. You have to make money, stay healthy, and hang out with friends. When you finally have time to really chase those dreams, you realize you have too much to handle." So this program will help you get organized. "Just go to your favorite sources to find the facts you need for your paper." Copy and paste from them, then rearrange the snippets and add in your own thoughts. Then all you have to do is press a button and your paper is done. Better yet, your snippets are shared so that students can use them to build more papers – and in the words of the video, "create a nation of empowered students. Citelighter organizes your education so you can focus on the important things" – your dreams, which you can get to once you've finished that stupid paper.

Now, this product is really amazing. I wouldn't call it a short cut or a cheat – it's simply helps students do what they think they should do when writing research papers. We know from Project Information Literacy that students are very pragmatic about papers, and for the most part don't consider adventures, but rather tasks that they need to get through using a familiar strategy and familiar databases. While librarians and instructors imagine research as a chance to explore, students work hard at reducing the overwhelming number of choices before them. They often use whatever tools have worked before – JSTOR! It's the answer to everything! – and don't want to invest the time in learning new tools or getting distracted by reading something that turns out not to be useful.

[Project Information Literacy](#) has documented how students approach research tasks, and the words students have used when talking about research are mostly negative emotions: confusion, stress, anxiety, being overwhelmed – though a few express being intrigued or excited by research.

The practical cut and paste approach to sources is confirmed – and then some – by [The Citation Project](#). This study of first year writers is pretty depressing. It's not that students plagiarize (though some do) and it's not that they don't know how to use sources effectively in writing (though mostly they don't). They don't understand the sources they use. That could be because they don't even *read* them. Almost all of the material students in the study drew from sources was quoted directly, rather than being paraphrased or summarized, and most quotes were from the first or second page of the source. It seemed students didn't read beyond the point where they found a useable quote. This isn't what we hope for when we assign research. Yet grabbing quotes and gluing them together is exactly what Citelighter is for. The video divides research into two parts: finding facts and making an argument. Anything that comes from a source is called a "fact," and the role of facts is to support an argument. You use facts to build your argument, like bricks. The facts don't influence your argument. They're merely building materials. Google and the library supply the bricks, you stick them together with your thoughts.

We're schooling students to take a position about something they don't know much about, and suggest in the process that all knowledge is pretty much the expressions of personal opinion supported by cherry-picked facts, rather than an ethical and open-ended process of reasoning from evidence. Rather than emphasizing how information might lead them to a conclusion, we ask them to gather evidence for a position they've arrived at independent of the evidence.

And this is so sad, because we would like to think that an important part of what students learn in college is respect for knowledge gained through interaction with sources, not simply using sources like advertisers or politicians or lobbyists. We want them to recognize that sources come from people like them and that, just like the authors of those sources, they play a role in the making of knowledge. We want liberal learning to be truly liberating, and we want the library to play a role in that act of liberation. We want our students to experience the library as a laboratory, a studio, a workshop where they can engage in the same activities that scholars and scientists do, and also as a place where they work side by side with other thinkers who have tackled similar questions. Instead, we hand them a set of rules and they go shopping for ingredients. They also have strict guidelines on how those ingredients must be listed on a label, one of those labels required by law that nobody actually reads.

I think this practice is closely related to Paolo Freire's banking concept of education. He used that phrase to describe a process of depositing information into the heads of students, a kind of teaching he felt was deliberately oppressive. It first tells students their job is to listen, not to create or question. It second suggests that knowledge is something concrete, immutable, not subject to change. Students can have no effect on it and have nothing worthwhile to contribute. In contrast, problem-posing education, he felt, gave students the freedom to ask questions and to engage in answering them, a kind of education that is "the practice of freedom" – which is what liberal education is meant to be. When students think of knowledge as stuff they acquire from Google or the library's various shopping platforms, if that is what they believe information is for, we have moved from the bank into the shopping mall. We haven't moved very far at all.

What does play have to do with all this? If you look the word up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definitions go on for pages. It's a rich word that means a whole lot of things: room for movement, a dramatic performance of a story, a method of making words mean something different than usual, to ridicule or mock, to amuse oneself, to engage in a game, to joke, to set in opposition, to perform a role involving mimicry, to have fun. These meanings tend to fall into two categories: performance and freedom. In a way, these map to two different kinds of play that engage different parts of the brain: epistemic play, which focuses on finding ways to accomplish goals, and ludic play, which is exploratory, improvisatory, engaged in the moment rather than in a future goal. Children may start by closely examining a toy, and when they feel they have a good grasp of it, they can do things with it. First they test the water, then they smack it to see what happens. Later, water might become a medium in which they compete with others to see who can swim the fastest. Which is another aspect of play: an organized competition that relies on practice and knowing the rules, rules which often reflect social structures and beliefs.

I should pause here and say that I'm not going to say much about gamification, which is applying elements of game design to situations that are not traditionally considered games. I am not myself a gamer, and a lot of the thinking about how gamification of education goes right over my head. I see potential in role playing and simulation that can deepen engagement, in pedagogies such as [Reacting to the Past](#), highly structured history role-playing games, but I'm a bit leery of the temptation to introduce competition as a lever for engagement. When it comes to the way knowledge works, winning isn't everything. On the contrary, it's an invitation to take shortcuts or oversimplify things that are complex in order to get to the end successfully. Getting really good at following rules may actually act against creativity and discovery. It makes the perfection of performance more important than freedom, just as earning a grade by figuring out what the teacher wants may distract students from exploring ideas that matter to them.

Ian Bogost, a game scholar, has criticized the faddish adoption of gamification in marketing and education, calling it "[exploitationware](#)" – and [worse](#). If you don't know Ian Bogost's work on games, he got a bit famous for [creating the Facebook "cow clicker"](#) – a totally pointless yet horribly addictive game that illustrated the pointlessness of games like Farmville.

If we were to design an information literacy cow clicker, we would have a game that explains to students how to work the library: which buttons to push, which behaviors lead to winning good grades, and how to persist while doing something that has no intrinsic meaning. On the other hand, there might be value in a game that explores how the library works. The former is merely instrumental; it would explain how to play by the rules, however peculiar and arbitrary those rules might be. It would imply that understanding and complying with rules is the purpose. The latter could give students a more critical approach to those rules and the understanding that would allow them to break them effectively. Because when we use a library, we're breaking it open, we're breaking ideas free from it, cracking the code, opening the library up as we open our minds. And we can't do that work if all we are focused on is performing tasks mechanically according to the rules.

I was struck by a metaphor used by Alison Gopnik [in a New York Times essay](#) in which she wrote about how children learn by playing. “Imagine if baseball were taught the way science is taught in most inner-city schools,” she wrote. “Schoolchildren would get lectures about the history of the World Series. High school students would occasionally reproduce famous plays of the past. Nobody would get in the game themselves until graduate school.” So she argued for the value of doing the thing we value, not just studying it. She also pointed out that some learning doesn’t lend itself to ludic play. Learning to read involves mastering some unnatural behaviors that are not intrinsically rewarding, but which become rewarding when they are so thoroughly mastered that the work involved become effortless and transparent. It’s not until children have practiced and developed facility with deciphering words and have mastered basic reading comprehension that they can experience what psychologist Victor Nell calls “ludic reading,” the trancelike state we experience when “lost in a book.”

In our classes, we want students to *do* actual research, not just practice certain routine moves, but there is a certain amount of practice involved and internalization of seemingly arbitrary rules before they can play in the library with confidence. This is why the 50-minute one-shot is so frustrating. If you have fifty minutes to prepare students to play a game of, say, cricket, you would run into the same frustrations. You’d never have time to play. Luckily, we are not the only ones guiding our students’ learning. When we have a one-shot, we’re simply helping them get ready to play. But as we do that, it’s important to inject in the preparation the understanding that pushing the right levers, clicking buttons, and citing sources with precision is not the point. It’s not about playing the part of a scholar, pretending to be someone you are not. It’s about the freedom that comes from playing with ideas. It’s a tricky balancing act – separating the epistemic game from the deeper, more serious, less goal-oriented, more exploratory play that is at the heart of authentic research.

We face a mirror image of this problem when it comes to our faculty. In higher education we have, to our shame, gamified research in the marketing sense of the word. Graduate students are schooled in the arbitrary rules of the game – you need to publish in this high-impact journal, even though we know the formula for measuring impact is flawed; you need to finely slice your research so you can get as many publications out of it as possible. The one who gets the most high-scoring lines on their CV wins. What is lost in the process is schooling in the purpose and ethics of research. Oh, that does still come through – scholars and scientists really do care about discovering new things and adding to what we know. But playing the game often interferes with sharing discoveries. And we know all too well that the artificial scarcity of published knowledge is interfering with scholarship.

This is why we need to be totally transparent about what it all costs. And when I say “cost” I mean not just monetary values but cultural costs, too. When we become a wallet to pay for our communities’ access to information so that they can advance their own careers – but a doctor in rural Pennsylvania can’t read the article that might help her diagnose and treat one of her patients, we’ve failed. When a conservation officer in Malawi can’t read new research about how to sustain fisheries that are needed to feed his people, or a public health worker in South Africa [makes a policy decision](#) based on an abstract because the full paper is not available – and later finds out that the full paper is seriously flawed – then we’ve failed. When we spend four years teaching students to use proprietary databases, then

cut them off the day they graduate, we've failed. When we spend most of our time figuring out how to stretch our limited dollars, and treat universal access to information as a fantasy that we can't begin to tackle because our vendors or our faculty or our bosses won't let us think big, we've failed. True, there is only so much we can do, and we have local demands that we feel we must address. But our support of closed systems of knowledge betrays our principles.

Without access to scholarship, most of the people of the world are unable to play with ideas the way we know can make a difference. If ideas matter, if libraries make a difference, they shouldn't be available only to the few.

The value of our profession and of the library as a social institution is that we are uniquely positioned to see the big picture, to recognize patterns in the ways societies create and share knowledge, to make knowledge accessible so that it can enable new knowledge. Our value is also in our public purpose: to defend intellectual freedom and to give everyone a chance to take part in that freedom.

How do we create libraries that support play in the best sense of word?

When I was staring at a blank page not long ago, wondering how to make a case for ludic libraries, I came across a book on urban public spaces, [The Ludic City by Quentin Stevens](#). In it, he looks at how people lay claim to public space and make it their own and they do so in a manner that is not what we usually think of when we think about urban development. He writes about public spaces as flexible, ambiguous, and continually redefined by its inhabitants. "Play," he says, "contains utopian impulses. It is non-exploitative and non-hierarchical. Play is subversive of social order . . . The experience of urban space is characterized by multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradictions, the unpredictable and the unfamiliar" (24-5). This, of course, sounds very much like a library to me, one that belongs to and is transformed by students, who are in turn transformed in ways nobody can quite predict. That kind of transformation requires that students learn how the library works, but once they are comfortable with both understanding and critiquing those rules, they can begin to improvise and explore. Stevens concludes, "play is the actualization of freedom, adventure, creativity, and discovery."

I think that libraries speak to people this way, as inhabitable spaces that enable freedom. They are on the one hand rule-bound, traditional, and rather mysterious. They are a little bit scary at first because they demand a certain amount of mastery from those who will penetrate its secrets. Yet we're there to help anyone who wants to play by giving them a chance to master the rules so that they can proceed to break them – playing with ideas in a way that offers freedom: freedom to think, to inquire, and to discover, not just to acquire information and be productive, but rather to engage in the seriously playful practice of freedom.

