

# Library-anxious students: a study of their concerns

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Librarians have long recognised that undergraduate students, particularly first-years, often feel overwhelmed by the size and complexity of an academic library, and don't know how to make it work for them (Grosser 1988). Negative emotions can run from confusion to debilitation, and can adversely affect a student's patronage of a library. The following discussion presents the findings of one library's attempt to investigate the causes of this apprehension, in order to foster more user-friendly relations with its particular clientele.

## **1. Literature Review**

Australian studies in the 1980s to early 1990s refer to this phenomenon as a "psychological barrier". No further literature has been published in Australia since that time. The more recent studies are American and they document the same phenomenon as "library anxiety".

### ***Australian studies***

Studies show that a high number of undergraduates are reluctant to ask for assistance in the library (Hatchard and Toy 1984b; Hatchard and Toy 1986b; Hatchard and Crocker 1990; Sullivan-Windle 1993). Kosa's study (1982) found that 49% of undergraduate students prefer to ask lecturers, tutors or peers. He assumes the inhibition reflects immaturity but he does not test the assumption. Reasons for not requesting assistance include: fear that the question is trivial or displays ignorance, librarians are too busy, and intimidation from librarians. Other studies concur (Hatchard and Toy 1986b; Roe 1975). Hatchard and Toy (1986b) contend that the problem is primarily a personality trait and only secondarily is it a library-induced problem. The basis of their conclusion is that two-thirds of students admit to emotional difficulties approaching strangers or authority figures, and to avoidance of unpleasant situations.

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It is likely that several variables combine to erode student confidence (Kosa 1982; Hatchard and Toy 1986b; Hatchard and Crocker 1990).

The problem of reluctance to ask library staff is widespread. Studies have shown that it can be partially mitigated with user education (Hatchard and Toy 1984b; Person 1981; King and Ory 1981), but it will never fully resolve (Hatchard and Toy 1984a; Hatchard and Crocker 1990). To overcome unease, students stress the importance of staff friendliness, approachability and ability to set others at ease, clear communication, helpfulness, patience and sound professional knowledge (Hatchard and Crocker 1990; Hatchard and Toy 1986a).

### **American studies**

Mellon (1986) performed a seminal study on the phenomenon and coined the term "library anxiety". The results of her research estimate that 75-85% of students experience anxiety due to intimidation by the size of the library, and lack of knowledge about what to do, how to research, and how to find the right location. She recognises a destructive cycle: the overwhelming feelings curb effective functioning; the student perceives all other students as library-savvy and so feels inadequate; in turn it causes reluctance to request assistance in order to conceal the lack of knowledge, and further confusion and incompetence result. The resulting emotions towards the library are strongly negative.

Bostick built on Mellon's work (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao and Bostick 2004) and developed the Library Anxiety Scale to measure anxiety. Bostick categorised five dimensions of library anxiety: barriers with staff, affective barriers, personal comfort in the library, knowledge of the library's resources, and mechanical barriers.

In the last decade, Jiao and Onwuegbuzie have become the foremost researchers on library anxiety, and prolific writers. They were the first to publish empirical studies in the field and Cleveland (2004) has published a literature survey of their research. Their primary focus is postgraduate students (Onwuegbuzie and Jiao 1998b).

In a study to validate the phenomenon of library anxiety, Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (1999a) test the criticism that library anxiety is merely another manifestation of personality trait anxiety. Unlike Hatchard and Toy in Australia (1986b), they found no significant relationship between the occurrences of the two types, thereby validating the independent existence of library anxiety. They are concerned to find situation-specific factors that contribute to library anxiety, and their research includes studies of learning styles (Onwuegbuzie and Jiao 1998a), self perception (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie 1999b), procrastination in studies (Onwuegbuzie and Jiao 2000), and perfectionism (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie 1998), study habits (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie 2001), reading skills (Jiao and Onwuegbuzie 2003) and user education (Onwuegbuzie and Jiao 1998a). All factors show a positive relationship to library anxiety, though a causal relationship is not always demonstrated.

## **2. The Study**

A study was performed at an Australian tertiary college in 2006. The college has two distinct and totally separate clientele: undergraduate students at the university and theology students in the denominational theological school.

System statistics and other counts showed that only 3.1% of undergraduate students used the library during the course of an academic year. The purpose of the study was to investigate various factors which may be affecting patronage of the library

by the undergraduates, with a view to implementing strategies to encourage usage. Library anxiety was one of several factors under investigation.

The data was obtained by small group interview, or focus group, comprised of 12 undergraduate volunteers: ten young women and two young men at various stages in their undergraduate careers. The discussion was audio taped and the data analysed using Grounded Theory Methodology. Details on this methodology can be found in Creswell (2003), Gorman and Clayton (2005), and Strauss and Corbin (1990).

All the students in the focus group were Arts students, so the results should not be generalised to undergraduates in general, or to theological students. Nonetheless it is expected that some elements of library anxiety may reach across the disciplines and the age differences, and correspond to some of the difficulties facing theological students as well. Theological students were not included in the study because the concern was for the low patronage statistics amongst the undergraduate population.

The following factors were found to contribute to the student's anxiety about the library:

### ***Lack of knowledge***

Unfamiliarity travels hand-in-hand with lack of knowledge. It can raise issues of potential embarrassment, fear of error or perceived ignorance, and elevate student insecurity and frustration, all of which can discourage library use. Half the students at interview said they would borrow resources if they knew how to perform the transaction, which indicates that lack of library knowledge appears to frighten would-be users.

The participants demonstrated a consciousness of expectations. They

are keenly aware that a university career expects students to learn, manage and discover on their own, including library use. If they are unable to use the library successfully, they prefer to avoid the issue or find another route around the lack of knowledge, such as asking friends. Interestingly, one student frequents public libraries because their staff welcome questions, whereas she feels that academic libraries expect students to know already.

There appears to be a self-perception issue at stake for the students. Inability to use the library effectively is not an objective matter to them; it is personal and highly subjective. They feel there is a lot to lose personally in an admission of a lack of knowledge and perceive it to adversely reflect on their abilities. As a consequence they may choose to simply avoid library use or wait until a library assistant (a student peer) is on duty. Alternatively, a question may be prefaced with an apology for ignorance.

### ***The library in general***

One first-year student reports that the library feels like "an alien place", and several others nodded. She described the doorway as a critical place: on one side she is in control of her surroundings but on the other side (in the library) the surroundings control her. Students postulate that increased familiarity with the library and how it operates may help to disarm these sentiments.

Students attribute the cause of this reticence to themselves: they do not know what they ought to know about the use of libraries and, to complicate the situation further, they don't know what it is that they don't know. They appear to experience a common bond in this predicament, rather like a secret society for reluctant library users, and they prefer to devise ways around these gaps in their knowledge by assisting each other rather

than asking for assistance. Five students said they appreciate staff initiative to offer assistance when students look perplexed, but staff can't expect (some) students to initiate requests for assistance, for this would mount a new anxiety upon the back of another.

### ***Library staff***

Students are apprehensive of library staff because they do not know them. The unfamiliarity elevates the anxiety factor, reduces interaction, and ultimately affects library patronage. The following reasons were offered as factors underlying their apprehension: lack of knowledge about what to do, which both raises feelings of inadequacy and reduces personal confidence to ask for assistance; shyness of staff whom they regard as authority; a presumption that librarians expect students to know; and intimidation by an anticipated or imagined staff response.

Anxiety about library staff causes one student to prefer the nearby State Library where she believes librarians have a more crucial public role than in academic libraries. Her fear of a "brush off" reflects anxiety, so avoidance is the preferred option. Students are unanimous that anxiety would be significantly relieved if one of the librarians is designated with responsibility for undergraduate students, and whom they could regard as "ours". It would increase their confidence to approach. They stressed that this librarian would need to be actively friendly, not just possess a distant politeness. The latter does not encourage library use in their view, because it doesn't actively quash fears.

### ***Circulation procedures***

Students also experience anxiety in performing circulation transactions. Most of them do not know the circulation period, the fines policy, the possibility of reservations, or how to return borrowed

items. About half the students presume that they cannot borrow because they do not possess a library card (students simply state their name).

Students agree that the most anxious time is the first borrowing transaction, because they are unfamiliar with the procedure and borrowing conditions. Successive uneventful transactions quickly reduce anxiety. This initial anxiety is alleviated to some extent if the checkout is with a student library assistant rather than a librarian, because the assistants are peers who do not invade their comfort levels. One student revealed that she had not renewed her overdue books because she was anxious about how to do it and possible staff response, but then found that renewal anxiety increased proportionately to the length of time overdue. She felt her only option was to allow the charges to accumulate.

### ***Catalogue***

Most students have never used the library catalogue and do not know that it is remotely accessible. They are unaware that the theological collection holds many secular books that may be relevant to their information needs, and they find the Pettee system that classifies it "so scary" that they choose blanket avoidance rather than attempt to use it. Their unfamiliarity breeds insecurity, which in turn generates anxiety about library use, and anxiety paralyses them into avoidance.

### ***Electronic databases***

The subject of electronic databases arose three times during the interview and it is clearly one of the students' more anxious concerns. All participants said they had tried to search databases in the past, and all admitted that they really didn't know how to use them and none felt able to attribute success to their attempts.

The students find the names of the

databases very confusing and do not know which one to use for their subject, nor how to use it effectively. They are unaware that the university library's web page contains guides to the relevant databases for specific subjects, and that database training is offered in group sessions. Students see databases as complex and non-intuitive, and readily concur about the escalating feelings of anxiety, but it is difficult to measure. The extent of this anxiety varies: one student said she simply "didn't like them much", another "hates" them, still another admits to becoming "flush with anger", and one student simply avoids the anxiety by resorting to manual searches of bound journals in order to "plump-out" bibliographies. Although only four students volunteered the personal effect of this anxiety, all students reported that anxiety exists. As anxiety is a personal topic, the non-contributing students were not asked for their personal experiences.

All students are keenly aware of their lack of knowledge on database use but none had ever dared to ask for assistance. Interestingly though, at interview they were eager to ask the library to provide group sessions, possibly because they felt an element of solidarity together in a group. It would appear that anxiety is at a level where a one-to-one session with a librarian is threatening and would further compound the anxiety level.

On the other hand, students regard search engines as entirely intuitive and they know that hits are guaranteed virtually every time. Internet searching does not raise anxiety levels, so therefore it is the information repository preferred by all the students in the focus group.

### ***Procrastination and perfectionism***

Students admit that procrastination in assignments can trigger anxiety in regard to the library. Students laughed at the idea that perfectionism can yield

library anxiety, and gallantly volunteered that perfectionism is not a problem for them. Students are confident that their personal study habits and reading skills do not contribute to their anxiety about the library. They said that anxiety mostly accompanies simply not knowing; if they had someone familiar who could explain some things to them, they would feel at ease and use the library more.

### ***Theological students***

Several girls commented that they are "petrified" of the theological students who share the library with them. Their major concern is the middle-aged men, though some of the younger men inspire fear as well. The male participants did not acknowledge anxiety triggered by theological students, but nonetheless understood how the girls may experience it. As reasons for their anxiety were not forthcoming at interview, it is unclear whether it is an intangible issue or they were simply unwilling to say, so reasons for the anxiety can only be surmised.

The university students have not figured out how to regard theological students, who evidently carry (or are attributed with) an awe that perplexes them. They were unable to explain how or why theological students are different, or what specifically causes their anxiety. They have no poor experiences to report, and they do not interact. Most likely, undergraduate student anxiety is built upon fears of presumption rather than actual circumstances.

Anxiety about theological students is effectively library anxiety, because the library is the only location where the two groups mix. Theological students inhabit the reading room during the day and leave when the library closes. The undergraduates on the other hand have 24 hour access to the reading room, and it is only after the library closes to theological students that they feel comfortable to take occupancy of the reading room.

The undergraduate students are silently pushed out of the library environs by their anxiety.

The impact on library patronage must be considered significant even though it cannot be quantified. There are no published studies on similar situations. This is an avenue that is worthy of further investigation.

### 3. Conclusion

In the current state the students find the library is fraught with anxiety on several levels, and lack of knowledge and unfamiliarity underlie virtually all of them. All twelve participants experience library anxiety in relation to various aspects of library policies, resources, library use, and staff, and the female participants experience library anxiety in relation to the other clientele: theological students. The degree of anxiety for each factor varies for each individual.

The anxiety-inducing issues do not operate independently, but rather several issues amalgamate and heighten anxiety in a similar way to the destructive cycle described by Mellon (1986). The students are unable to tackle the anxiety issues because each anxiety-promoter cannot be extricated from the others. Clearly, anxiety has adversely affected student patronage of the library.

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