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## The Sounds and the Furies: Managing an Active Library in a New Generation of Learners

Alan Bernstein

Valdosta State University, [abernste@valdosta.edu](mailto:abernste@valdosta.edu)

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# GOING WHITE PAPER

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## The sounds and the furies: Managing an active library in a new generation of learners

by Alan Bernstein

The Odum Library of Valdosta State University recently participated in the LibQual™ survey to assess how well the library is performing in three specific areas: Effect of Service, Library as Place and Information Control. Though all areas received comments from survey participants, the Library as Place section was of greatest interest. In particular, noise in the library received by far the most comments, most of them negative. Patrons were upset with both the volume of noise floating around the building as well as the nature of the noise itself.

In olden times, times when stereotypically bun-haired, stern-looking, almost exclusively female librarians roamed the floors, anything louder than a whisper was quickly and decisively “shushed.” Times, appearances, and the predominance of female librarians and library staff have changed — indeed, changed a lot, if our library is any indication.

But, then, what about the noise? Quietness has heretofore been a hallmark characteristic of the academic library. Now it sometimes seems as though noise is not merely a sublime nuisance but practically an expected accompanier to the bustle of activity in the library. The chatter

of groups working together on a project, the cacophonous rings of multiple cell phones, printers churning out pages of prose (or, perhaps, porn), and the disquieting hiss of the espresso machine in the resident café combine to make the library a much different place than most of us remember from days gone by.

Is this bad? Is this a natural evolution? Is this a harbinger of what the 21st century academic library sounds like?

As I examined the noise phenomenon in my library, reviewed its history, contemplated my developing attitudes, and, ultimately, analyzed my (and the library staff’s) thoughts about the noise issue, I identified a model of explanation. Actually, it is not my model at all; it is a famous model first written about in the 1960s and on a subject far removed from library noise.

In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross posited a famous archetype for how people deal with grief, tragedy, and death.<sup>1</sup> The model involved five discrete stages with a person passing consecutively through each stage. My association of library noise with Kübler-Ross’ five stages of grief is

neither an attempt at macabre humor nor an attempt to shock an audience. In my ruminations, over several years, regarding the perennial, bothersome, and oft-commented on issue of library noise, I noticed that many of my own stages of reaction to the issue itself, as well as patrons’ complaints, fit (admittedly in a much less life-changing way) this famous model.

Kübler-Ross’ five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. When looking at library noise and each of these five emotions/stages, clearly there are not “perfect” matches in the library arena. Nevertheless, our history at the Odum Library points to curious and interesting parallels. When attendance began a rather sharp ascension in the 1990s, as personal computers became more popular and students enjoyed the opportunity to check e-mail or surf the Web in the comfort of the library, noise began to increase noticeably. We responded, though, clearly with *denial* to comments and complaints regarding this upsurge in noise. As the library staff had experienced the noise increase in a gradual, measured way, the prompt reply to such a comment or complaint was outright denial: “Oh no, it’s not really that noisy; it

just seems that way in the one area where you happen to be sitting. Why not move somewhere else." The "denial" approach was part-legitimate and part-stonewalling. We had always had a rather informal, unwritten noise policy calling for quiet in certain designated areas of the building, though enforcement was sporadic, inconsistent, and necessitated staff to be part-time police officers, which was extremely unpopular with the staff and with patrons as well. Like the terminal patient initially denying the reality of his or her condition, it was easier merely to deny that a problem with library noise existed than to deal with it straightaway.

The second stage of dealing with noise, parallel with the Kübler-Rossian grief model, is *anger*. More specifically, in the case of library noise, it may not be so much the

emotion of anger setting in, as it is an annoyance or irritation as the reality of the problem reveals itself. Having passed through the denial phase, our library staff came to realize that noise was substantively a different concern than it had been years ago. The bustle of "normal" activity united with other distracters (for example, larger groups working together on projects, multiple cell phone conversations, large groups playing role-playing games) forced the realization of a problem and led, somewhat consequently, to exasperation on the part of staff that did resemble anger.

Now, the third step in the model is *bargaining* and, indeed, I find obvious parallels in the ways libraries deal with the noise phenomenon. After denying a problem with noise exists, and then the grudging recognition peppered with


annoyance setting in, what transpires are attempts to make the problem go away, usually not with drastic, strong-arm techniques, but with modifications to existent policy or, perhaps, the creation of a thoroughly new noise policy. Compromises are made, and concessions and conciliations take hold. Maybe a designated room is established for cellular phone use. Maybe, as in our library, areas of floors are specified for active-learning areas (more noise allowed) or quiet-study zones (silence or low-level, hushed conversations only allowed). Whatever arrangements are made and whatever policies are put into place, it is a form of bargaining with an emerging reality: Noise in libraries, much more noise than historically acceptable or conceivable, exists and likely will not disappear. The noisemakers (personal and machine-made) are bargained with; the

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attitude becomes “they cannot be eliminated, thus it is better to work with them and find a mutually acceptable middle ground.”

As we move from the stage of bargaining to the stage of **depression**, a realization must take place. Few if any librarians or library staff members, I imagine, truly get depressed over the reality of a noise problem in their building. Here, I would say, using a model of grief may be a bit overstated. Nevertheless, though depression in a clinical sense may not be present, other depression-like emotions and feelings may obtain. Once a library noise policy and procedure have been set through bargaining, aggravation, dissatisfaction and frustration may grow in library employees having to live with the noise and enforce a policy that, essentially, allows it. These ways of thinking or feeling do mimic depression, at least subtly. The inability to force noise out altogether, the rationalizing that justifies the existence of undesired and counterintuitive policies, and the realization that the library is no longer the same place it once was (and, likely, will never be again) can cause a mild depression, especially in long-term, older employees.

Taken to its modeled conclusion, the last stage of reaction is **acceptance**. After passing through the feelings and mild emotional turbulence of the four previous phases, library employees eventually accept that a different building environment exists than the one they have traditionally understood. The accommodation of some noise, selectively and pragmatically allowed, is a form of demonstrative acceptance to a new way of being. There are perhaps few libraries that finally have reached this last stage. Most libraries are in a nether region somewhere between bargaining and depression. Libraries want to adapt and move with the

times, but such wrangling to create mutually acceptable boundaries and guidelines can create disharmony and rancor, both for patrons and library staff.

Libraries are in a transitional phase. The desire to stay current, not merely with the books and journals on the shelves but with varying infrastructure, necessitates acclimatizing to changing patron expectations. Our Internet café features a Jazzman™ snack bar where jazz music is played all day and evening. Heretofore, it would have been unimaginable to have continual music playing anywhere in the library. A small symbol of changing times, perhaps. Noise is but one issue in the changing landscape of academic libraries, including: prioritizing computer and printer access (for example, what privileges do community members, alumni, and children of staff or faculty have in a local academic library?); food and drink policies in the library; and, library hours (will we all eventually be truly 24/7?).

Many libraries have begun handling these developing issues; other libraries have yet to address them, perhaps thinking (naively) that they will go away or waiting to see which way the winds of change blow regarding emerging technologies and student demands on library service.

The quandary regarding library noise is simply a representative phenomenon in the mushrooming evolution occurring in academic libraries. The advent of the personal computer may have been the first salvo, but so much more has followed. Maintaining a holding pattern or, worse, trying to impede or thwart the changes in students' natures and needs is akin to placing a lot of fingers in a lot of holes in the dike. It is not merely obstructionist; it is counterproductive. To paraphrase

the father of information theory, Claude Shannon<sup>2</sup>, communication is reliable and productive when it occurs over even noisy channels provided that the rate of communication is below a certain limit referred to as the channel capacity. In other words, the very theme of this paper, library noise, may be a metaphor for the importance of clear communication between the library and its customer base. Too much “noise” hinders clear communication, though a certain degree of noise is acceptable if the conduits for the communication remain sufficiently open. Attempting to stifle the noise altogether may prove too onerous a task, neither worth the effort nor, ultimately, in the best interests of the library or its users. And, moving from the genius of Claude Shannon to that of Thomas Kuhn . . . .

What I see ultimately happening is a paradigmatic shift in the way libraries operate and respond to noise (as well as other aforementioned traditional “problems”). Only when this shift fully obtains, will the final Kübler-Rossian stage of “acceptance” truly occur. What is being seen in today's academic libraries are learning commons, less physical space devoted to books and journals and more space to computers, open learning areas, cafés, and peripatetic reference librarians with clipped-on Bluetooths™. These are all signs of the shift occurring. We definitely live in interesting times as active libraries evolve. ►►

#### Resources:

1. Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. (1969) *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan.
2. Shannon, C.E. (1948, July and October). A Mathematical Theory of Communication. *Bell System Technical Journal*, 27, pp. 379–423 & 623–656.