Stop Having Fun and Start Being Quiet: 
Noise Management in the Academic Library

by Steven J. Bell

Students deep in thought seated at long wooden study tables. Main reading rooms with a sound level just decibels above a church during silent prayer. The information commons where the only sound heard is fingers tapping away on keyboards. The academic library is likely to conjure up sentimental images of peace and serenity for most academic administrators. Now juxtapose upon those scenes of solitude and quiet the static of a dozen competing ringtones along with students chattering into their cell phones, groups of students hovering around a computer monitor to get a better view of the live international soccer game they excitedly jabber about, or the group of young ladies and men wondering aloud about their plans for tonight’s football game. Still think the academic library is the campus haven for those seeking quiet solitude? Think again.

In an ironic twist of events, not only is the academic library far from deserted, it is downright noisy. Not long ago academic administrators spoke openly about the obsolescence of libraries in the 21st century. Who, they asked, would need libraries when students and faculty could conduct research from their own rooms and offices? The reality is that the academic library has succeeded all too well as a popular campus space, especially if it has recently renovated or newly constructed. These days the problem has nothing to do with getting the campus community into the library; it’s getting them to keep the noise down when they are there. And when they don’t, the academic library can erupt into a battlefield.

Though not a problem entirely unique to the academic library, since many once quiet institutions now bear the unfortunate fallout from our talkative and increasingly rude society, the challenge of what to do about it is particularly perplexing for academic librarians. We want to encourage the campus community to use the library and feel comfortable about socializing while there; libraries can be about fun. However, the library is also an important space to an equal number of users who want any noisy activity banned. Our challenge is to create a balanced environment that is hospitable to both those who want others to accept noise in the library and those who just want a quiet place for their studying. This issue will explore how such a balance might be struck, and the hurdles administrators may confront in achieving it.

Recognizing the Problem
Like many academic library administrators, I was pleased to see the increase in usage of the library. The noise level exceeded that of the less-busy past, but it was an acceptable tradeoff. We discovered that millennial students like group study; they are multi-taskers who can simultaneously study, listen to music, play video games and conduct multiple instant messaging conversations. Surely, we all thought, this group of students can successfully adapt to noise in the library.

Surprise again. For many students the academic library is the only place on campus where they can study quietly, and they are quick to remind
us of this and the library's commitment, in their minds, to keep it that way. So it takes little effort to imagine what happens when the students who think noise is acceptable, and those who think the library must be quieter than a morgue, find themselves in a clash over library territory and how it should be used.

My wake up call for action was the discovery of a student-authored opinion piece [http://www.nowpublic.com/opinions/sfu-library-place-fun-1] in which the student wrote "To many, a library is a quiet place filled with books and reference materials and people studying. On the other hand, to some others, it seems quite the opposite." The author proceeds to state that the library is no place for socialization or fun. Coupled with this student's harsh views of a library with socialization, came a flurry of complaints from students at my own library about the louder-than-ever first floor computing area. It seemed like we were ready for action, but there was no clear plan.

While this problem is a vexing one, the good news is that no library is alone in confronting the noise dilemma. As a community we can share and exchange ideas for potential solutions. Here are some of the approaches emerging from the literature and discussion lists that offer hope:

- Marketing programs to distribute cards or notes that offer gentle reminders about being courteous and sensitive to those who come to the library for quiet

A number of these strategies are examined in more depth throughout this discussion of noise in the academic library.

**The Death of the Refuge**

Noise in the library is hardly a recent development. In March 1997 Harper's Magazine carried an article entitled "Silence, Please" by Sallie Tisdale. In the piece, Tisdale laments the many changes in the public library, and observes specifically how the noise in libraries made them so different from the ones she frequented as a child. In referring to this change, she writes that "something else I miss very much is silence...Some libraries now post NO SILENCE PLEASE signs as part of their marketing campaigns...The boundaries that have kept the library a refuge from the street and marketplace are deliberately torn down in the name of access and popularity. In a world of noise and disordered information, a place of measured thought...is invaluable." In a prescient way, Tisdale sums up the current noise dilemma.

The shift in thinking to "library as place" brought with it a new attitude towards noise in the library. Academic librarians realized that more socialization and cultural events and activity in the library would invite more user traffic. New cafes and lounge areas with comfortable seating, computing clusters and a relaxation of intolerance for noise worked well. By themselves such changes contributed to a minimal noise increase.

Since the time when Tisdale observed the noise problem in 1997, the use of electronic devices, especially among college students, has skyrocketed. Students are constantly on cell phones, though the popularity of texting helps eliminate some conversations. The popularity of iPods and YouTube leads to far more multimedia in the library, and although headphone use should eliminate noise, many students are oblivious to how loud their audio is playing. Perhaps no librarian could have anticipated that all these factors, along with a growing societal lack of courtesy and respect for others seeking quiet, would con- verge to yield a library where the noise levels far exceed our expectations or imagination.

So now that academic libraries are enjoying an increase in traffic, what do they do to contain the growing volume of noise?

**Seeking Solutions**

As some librarians have suggested, perhaps as much out of frustration as well as hoping for a simple solution, why not just tell the offending students to be quiet. Not only do we want to treat our students as adults, but academic librarians absolutely must avoid any perceptions of the stereotypical shushing librarian of days of yore. Constantly reminding and asking students to hold the noise down is hardly a sustainable solution, and efforts to ban cell phones or multimedia would be ridiculous and ineffective. But there is a whole range of strategies being explored in academic libraries that may minimize the noise and help to restore peace in the library.

**Zoning Out the Noise.** One of the most popular and least complicated strategies is zoning. The idea here is to create zones within the library where noise is accepted or where quiet is protected as if it were an endangered species. Once the zones are established, students are then expected to situate themselves in the appropriate zone depending on their preferences for either noise or quiet.

In theory, the zoning strategy is an excellent idea. It requires little capital investment or intervention from librarians. In practice, the results can be rather different. Its success depends on student cooperation.

The downfall of the zoning approach is that students will simply choose to not give a damn. Students looking for a space to meet or watch a DVD on their laptop will ignore the quiet zone designation, and that's when all hell breaks loose with library workers often caught in the crossfire.

The success of these zones can depend on advance preparation that involves observation of student behavior. Where do they routinely
make the most noise? What are students doing there? Where are the pockets of quiet? It is best to designate as zones those spaces that have naturally emerged as noisy or quiet, based on student behavior.

Creating the Right Environment. If library noise is getting out of hand, then the situation deserves a building walkthrough done jointly with the library director, his or her supervising academic officer, and a facilities administrator. That might jumpstart the planning of space that is more conducive to noise control. Achieving desired outcomes depends on the possibilities that exist for anything from minor renovations to the more radical repurposing of existing space.

Consider the computer or information commons. It has a reputation as one of the academic library's top noise pollution areas. Students congregate to use computers, which inevitably leads to talking, socializing, and a fair amount of noise. That noise can flow into adjoining areas and cause a disturbance to those around and outside the computer commons.

Working together the library director, provost and facilities manager can look for ways to remedy these trouble spots. Strategies can include the proper positioning of acoustic panels to partition some of the computer pods from adjoining areas of the library or the introduction of sound-reducing fabrics on walls and floors that can minimize sound travel and echo.

Moving the Puzzle Pieces. There may be options even when there is no possibility for space renovations or new funding. That's when space utilization needs re-thinking. Even in those situations where we think we've figured out how the students will use our thoughtfully designed spaces, they'll discover that your quiet zone gets the best cell phone reception in the library, or that the nice sunny spot for the periodicals reading area is a great space for study group meetings.

As much as possible just allow the noise to happen in the areas that have grown noisy over time; efforts to quash the behavior may result in an unexpected student backlash. Consider moving more computers into those areas. Many libraries have identified the main entrance area and adjoining space as a particular sore point, so it's no surprise that computing areas are often located in those vicinities.

On the other hand, lower levels that have less natural light and traffic should be populated with single-student study carrels. Avoid tables that are more conducive to group study; they tend to generate noisy conversation. Put those tables together in spaces that have grown popular for study group meetings. As the library moves in the right direction of proper furniture and equipment placement and the development of noise and quiet zones, good signage will help students get flow. Use it to let students know where quiet is expected and noise is tolerated.

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Avoid allowing these moves to alienate your students. Get student government and campus organization involved in the discussion. Ask for their opinions and get them involved in this process. Use your library blog and photo site to publicize this issue and generate community feedback. All this can help to bypass those unpleasant "why weren't we consulted" situations that no administrator wants.

A Room with No View. The ultimate quiet spot in an academic library is a private study room. Any new library construction project will no doubt create as many as the facility will allow, and offer a variety of sizes and shapes to accommodate varying student needs. Study rooms allow groups to discuss, play, view and work in ways that keep their activity and noise isolated. The only problems associated with study rooms are that there are never enough of them, and policies are needed to ensure equitable access. One frequent challenge is moving the right students into the rooms to keep the noise where it belongs. All too often a single student takes over a room to escape the noise while groups are forced to work in other areas. That exacerbates the problem we're trying to solve. That's where sensible policies and occasional staff intervention may help eliminate these awkward scenarios.

The Library is Alive and Well — But Noisy

As the Library Director at Santa Barbara City College, Kenley Neufeld sees the increasing door counts at his library as evidence that the elevated noise level is far from a show-stopper for the majority of students. For them, the campus library is still alive and well. The most difficult part, according to Neufeld, is maintaining one level of the facility for quiet study so the library can best serve both noisy and quiet constituents. In the past two years the library has gone from a quiet, rarely visited building to a vibrant, happening and buzz-worthy place on campus. The gate count is up over 80 percent in that short time period owing to new leadership, new policies, a centralized open computer lab, new coffee bar, and a welcoming friendly staff that have reversed an old "no" culture. Increases in traffic mean added noise is unavoidable, and at this library, zoning has worked well. Neufeld says the administration is aware of the increased traffic, but perhaps not the noise level. Top administrators do walk through from time to time and seem happy with the environment, especially compared to years past. To his way of thinking, that's a win.

But according to Inga Barnello, Associate Librarian at Noreen Reale Falcone Library, Le Moyne College, in the library's battle royal over noise it appears that noise is going to win. The noisemakers, she says, have the upper hand in this cultural revolution and the numbers as well. The loud people at her library do not think they are loud and haveno problem expecting anyone who wants quiet to move. Her own theory, and some librarians would no doubt agree, is that the video-game generation has become "blind" to noise. Their sense of space is limitless.
and it all belongs to them. Barnello understands her colleagues who maintain that libraries can adapt for noise and quiet, but believes libraries are obligated to provide quiet areas and enact policies to serve users with a variety of educational needs, learning styles, or disabilities. She sees a bumpy road ahead for libraries trying to provide and police quiet.

Outside of some articles based on anecdotal evidence, little is known about the extent of noise disturbance in academic libraries, and to what extent cell phone use is the root of the problem. But some new research may provide some insights into the issues related to cell phone use and what libraries are doing about it.

Dr. Katie Lever, Assistant Professor, Western Connecticut State University, co-authored an article titled “Cell phones in campus libraries: An analysis of policy responses to an invasive mobile technology” (Information Processing & Management: An International Journal, 43(4), p.1133-1139). Lever and co-author Dr. James Katz contacted 150 colleges and universities and had 87 responses regarding the policies that their libraries use to address cell phone use.

Lever says that 35 of the libraries had policies about cell phone use posted online, 26 had posted signs in the library only, 10 had notations on their websites supplemented by signs in the library itself, 6 made mentions of its policies in an operating manual and 10 had no policy about cell phone use.

In personal interviews with librarians, Lever gathered interesting commentary about cell phone use. One library developed an innovative tactic to approach cell phone use. They distributed humorous cards to users who were being disruptive. Another librarian noted that cell phones had been ringing so frequently in her campus library that patrons began complaining. However, some librarians reported that after removing signs barring cell phone use, patrons began complaining less and interestingly, the cell phone noise subsided somewhat. One of Lever’s most significant findings is that academic libraries with the lowest number of noise complaints are those where students do an adequate job policing one another’s use of cell phones.

**Restoring Peace and Order**

If out-of-control noise, socialization and disorder are causing the campus library to seem more like a Wild West frontier town saloon than a campus center for serious study, the time for action is at hand. The institution’s good citizens are waiting for the library director to emerge from the solitude of his or her corner office to re-establish the academic library as the haven for peace and order. Doing so creates an opportunity for the director and the chief academic officer to work collaboratively to identify and implement the best strategies for their library. These strategies are likely to include some mix of zoning, new or rearranged furniture or noise abatement materials, and some traditional appeals to all students asking for their cooperation and mutual respect for their colleagues.

This boiling pot of tension may even present an opportunity for wider collaboration between librarians, faculty, student leaders and other academic support administrators. Why not have a campus forum in the library where all parties can share their opinions, and recommend possible solutions. Faculty in particular, though they tend to use the library less than in the past, can lend their expertise if the institution has programs in interior design, architecture, materials engineering or other fields where applied knowledge could be put to great use in creating appealing and practical social spaces that move the library closer to achieving the balance between noise and quiet.

When the chief academic officer asks the library director what problem is keeping him or her awake at night, "noise in the library" is hardly the expected response. But noise in the library is no trivial matter. It, along with other "quality of life" factors, such as reliable photocopiers and clean restrooms, make the difference between an academic library that is avoided at all costs and one that is a prime campus destination. Academic administrators have a responsibility to ensure students have a reliable campus location for quiet study.

The situation is not hopeless, but it cannot be ignored with lame "Oh, that’s the way people are nowadays" excuses. Restoring the balance between quiet and noise, creating a library that can meet the needs of all its students, is within reach. The effort will take time, hard work, and some creativity, but the outcome will be well received. So the next time a student complains to the library administration about the lack of quiet in the library and the only response he or she hears is "I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you over all the noise...what did you say?" then it is clearly time to start strategizing to restore the peace and order.

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