A FISH TRIES TO DANCE:

ONE READER'S RESPONSE TO LIBRARIES' ADULT SERVICES--

RESPONSE TO MARGARET E. MONROE'S LECTURE

ADULT SERVICES: PREDICTION AND CONTROL

By

Ronald Gross

Thank you. First, let me share with you the trepidation that I have in being up here. Professor Monroe kindly sent me an early draft of her speech so that I could begin thinking about my response as she was working on it, and she wrote, "I intend to improve this considerably before delivery, but I wanted to share this rough draft with you." I read it and wrote back immediately, "If you improve that draft you will topple me right off the platform before I even get my turn, so please do not improve that draft any further." Well, she went right ahead and improved it.

On the other hand, I am compensated because I feel a kind of bond to her and you, like the farmer about whom Ezra Pound tells a story in the ABC of Reading. (13) Pound gave the farmer a copy of Emerson, came back a month later, and asked him how he liked it. The farmer thought for a minute and said, "That fellow has a lot of my ideas."

My foreboding about coming here today was sharpened by the fact that, over the past year or two, I have gone through the strange but nice experience of being sort of handed from one librarian to another -- I am thinking of people like Kathleen Weibel, Jacquelyn Thresher, Linda Crowe, and people in California and Iowa and Tennessee. All of them used me for special occasions, and I began to notice that they all had

something in common, that they formed a sort of network of people who were trying to advance and enliven libraries and librarians: Color, motion, vivacity and caring characterize all of these people. They had a certain spirited visionary quality about what the possibilities were in the field. They were very effective in what they were doing and they all mentioned that Margaret Monroe lay behind, or was at the root of, what they were doing. This is the first time I have met Margaret Monroe personally, but I have been hearing her name for quite a while, and it is really a great pleasure to share this day with her and with all of you.

I should explain the title of my piece. Having heard Professor Monroe's wonderful imagery of the dance that librarians do or don't do, you will understand half of the reason for my title, *A Fish Tries to Dance*. Now let me tell you about the fish part. That is an allusion to Woody Allen's response to a final examination question when he was asked to explicate the causes of the War of 1812 by explaining the American position and the British position on the fishing rights dispute. He looked at the question for a while, and then he wrote on the first page, "I know nothing about the American position on the fishing rights dispute that led to the War of 1812." Then he turned the page and wrote at the top of the second page, "I know nothing about the British position on the fishing rights dispute that led to the War of 1812." Then he turned that page and wrote at the top of the third page, "I will therefore write this essay from the point of view of the fish." So, I am here today, to talk from the point of view of the fish, and I really have only one qualification to do so, a purely genetic one. I have here the report of the New York Public Library for 1974-75. In that report the library did a nice thing: they ran at the top of each page a picture of a user with a little quote from the user. Most of these users are just the sort of people that you would expect—Arthur Schlesinger, John Kenneth Galbraith, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Agnes De Mille, DeWitt Wallace. Well, there is among this group one scruffy, disreputable looking old guy, my father
Michael Gross, who says, "My indebtedness to the New York Public Library goes back half a century. I did not have formal education beyond elementary school, yet I have written a half dozen text books and almost a hundred articles for magazines. Down the years the library has been my teacher, my guide and an unfailing source of information on every research problem. Without this cheerfully given expert aid, most of my work could not possibly have been completed." This genetic background, and the feeling that we share many of the same ideas, make me welcome this opportunity to react to Margaret Monroe's address, Adult Services: Prediction and Control.

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Why is the library such a congenial place for adult learners?

The library liberates; it does not coerce. No one is compelled by law to use it. It does not test us at the door to see if we are smart enough to make use of it. It does not tell us what to learn. It does not insist that we learn in a particular way. It does not dictate what materials we should use. It does not command us to learn in a particular cognitive style. It does not set the hours when we shall be ready and able to learn. It does not tell us to avoid co-operating with others in our learning. It does not test and grade us. It does not have any bias of one particular educational method, institution, or agency.

These are powerful positive conditions. They set the scene for adult learning as it should be: voluntary, flexible, convenient, economical, congenial, accessible, non-threatening, multi-faceted -- and above all, taking its cue and its course from the learner.

I believe that the library, at least as much as the school or college, is the most appropriate focus of lifelong learning, the basic resource for lifelong learners. It always has been. As I wrote in The Lifelong Learner in collaboration with Joseph Covino
of the Great Neck Library on Long Island, New York: "the library has always been the second home of free learners. Here they have traditionally found exactly what they want, when they want it, without... bureaucratic hassles."(14) I have advocated among policy-makers in Albany and Washington that funds for lifelong learning be funneled through libraries, and through learners themselves.

The point has been beautifully put by James Flexner in his introduction to Whitney North Seymour's book For the People: Fighting for Public Libraries: "Does education mean only taking courses?" Flexner asks. "Surely self-education, once universally recognized as basic to American spirit, remains basic to all learning... Libraries are the capitals of self-education. The young today speak of 'doing your own thing'. In the arena of knowledge, the most universal and flexible tool for doing your own thing is the library. Why does government regard sending citizens to school and often on to college as so important that the opportunity should be furnished free by the state, and yet allow libraries to languish."(15)

Now, I'd like to respond from the context of adult education and lifelong learning to the two main points which Margaret Monroe has invited us to think about with her. She talked about prediction and control, and there are indeed some new findings and fresh initiatives in the adult education and lifelong learning fields which may add to your strength in achieving those two grand goals.

With regard to prediction, the most notable recent study has yielded data which illuminate a key question: what makes adults seek


to learn? What provokes, drives, or otherwise impels people to undertake to learn a given thing at a given point in their lives?

The study is *Americans in Transition: Life Changes as Reasons for Adult Learning*, by Carol Aslanian and Henry Brickell, published by the College Board. This study adds fresh detail and fresh insights to the adult learning principles deriving from the life-tasks that Dr. Monroe mentioned. Taking off from the life stages and life phases research which Gail Sheehy has popularized in her best-selling book *Passages*, the findings reveal why today's American adults, as they turn up at the library door, are choosing to learn.

According to Aslanian and Brickell's findings, half of all adult Americans 25 years old and older learned or studied some topic in the past year. Why are half of all adults learning?

Almost 85 percent of all adult learners named some change--some transition--in their lives that caused them to start learning when they did. Adults attributed about half of their learning to changes in their jobs or careers. They had to learn in order to get a job, to keep a job, to do better in their job, to advance in their career. Another dominating factor was family life transitions--getting married, getting a divorce, moving to a new location, having a baby, children growing up, and so on. Further, from telephone and face-to-face interviews, we have a good idea of what the adult learner looks like--his family profile, his employment status, his occupation, how he spends his time, where he learns, when he learns, and what he learns.


What are the implications of these findings?

Now the providers of educational opportunities and resources can be advised and then plan as to how, when, and where to serve adult learners. Information and counseling centers can determine the best direction to point adult learners. Public policymakers, with this knowledge, can shape programs to meet the needs of adult learners. Librarians can use this data, and the human insights it provides, to further sharpen their sensitivity to the kinds of help their patrons may need at any one point.

Now, I'd like to address the second principle affirmed and articulated by Dr. Monroe, control: The first three forms which this takes, she argued, are collaborative planning with users, seizing on developments and trends within the community, and working with other providers of adult learning opportunities. (I feel also strongly about her fourth and final one, by the way -- standing up for intellectual freedom -- but you cannot meet all trains in any one speech.)

My own way of thinking about these three modes of control, from the point of view of adult education and lifelong learning, is through the image of what I've called "The Invisible University." "The Invisible University" is the term I use for the wealth of resources and opportunities available for lifelong learning. These ways to learn and grow range from small grass-roots groups in the women's movement, through "learning exchanges" serving whole communities, to major national projects. The Invisible University includes libraries, museums, films, television, and organizations that offer opportunities to learn on a more flexible, freer basis than just taking a course or program at a college or school.

Perhaps the quickest way to get a picture of the catalog of this Invisible University is simply to think of the bulletin board or wall of announcements in your library. I'd hope that wall contains the
widest possible variety of learning opportunities, from announcements 
from major institutions of higher learning, to cards on which individ-
ual patrons have announced their learning needs ("I'd like to get to-
gether with someone interested in computer programming of simulations," 
"I can teach needlepoint in return for child care" "Who wants to join 
a group to read Shakespeare along with viewing the plays on public 
television?")

You'll find a quick run-down of The Invisible University in my 
book The Lifelong Learner. (18) Basically, it is not a place, of course. 
It is a conceptual key to a whole range of places, people, and resources 
that are useful and fun to learn from.

What I am really describing here can, I think, be summed up in a 
phrase that has come more and more into use: "Appropriate Technology."

Appropriate Technology is that impulse in a variety of fields that 
seeks to get the best out of technological aids, without becoming their 
servants, by keeping them small, manageable, cheap, and what Ivan 
Illich calls "congenial." When we ask ourselves, what is appropriate 
technology for lifelong learning?, I think the answer comes fairly 
readily. It is not sending everyone back to college - that is the big, 
bureaucratic, impersonal, institutionalized, expensive answer. (It 
also has become too costly just in terms of the price of gasoline.)

Appropriate technology for lifelong learning means tools, re-
sources, and people who help in the ways you librarians do:
*that are at the disposal of the learner;
*that permit the maximum of choice and flexibility to suit 
the learner's needs, style, and taste;
*that are cheap and plentiful;
*that can be provided locally rather than centrally.

(18) op. cit.
What might some of them be?

*A good book and a light to read it by!

*Those lovely little tape cassettes that are the most promising undiscovered medium of learning and sharing in our culture, through which one can bring the world's leading minds into one's own home to learn from, while driving to and from work, while mixing the vichysoise or doing yoga — minds like Margaret Mead, Arnold Toynbee, Carlos Castaneda, Frank Lloyd Wright, Carl Rogers, Isaac Asimov, and Buckminster Fuller.

*Networking and sharing learning in the community.

*Whole courses by leading experts on film or video-cassettes, such as the Alistair Cooke series America, for screening at home or by community organizations through the libraries or systems in Buffalo, Elmira, Garden City, Poughkeepsie, and Yonkers among others.

*The postal service. (Ivan Illich once said to me: "I live out of the way in Cuernaca, so I send a lot of letters, and get a lot of letters back. That's my Invisible University.")

*Above all, people, like yourselves, who are caring, skilled, and knowledgeable.

Let me give an example from one learner's experience. When I wanted to learn general semantics, I did not pay to take one of the locally-offered courses, with an instructor who was an unknown quantity, a syllabus which might not suit my personal needs, the hassle of having to get to a certain place at a certain time every week, and the cost. Instead, I went the library learning route. Fortunately, I fell into the hands of one of your colleagues — a sensitive, resourceful, intelligent, highly professional adult services librarian. With her help, I got the most renowned lecturer in the country to deliver this course in my living room whenever I felt in

the mood - even though he was in San Francisco and I was in New York. How? By borrowing a set of S. I. Hayakawa films from my local library.

I augmented Hayakawa on film with other experts on tape cassettes, to which I could listen at my convenience. My television viewing of commercials and sitcoms provided ideal case-studies on which to use the concepts I was learning. Books, journals in the field, and phone interviews with some of the leading experts completed my do-it-yourself "course". I proceeded throughout at my own pace, skipping things I wasn't interested in, digging deeply into topics of personal interest. The result: no grade or credits to show, but I acquired a potent mental tool which I use virtually every day. I enjoyed myself tremendously, and I proved to myself that self-directed learning, nurtured and facilitated by a professional who has a thorough mastery of her field, using a wide variety of resources, can be an ideal form of education.

All our studies show that adult learners do not, for the most part, want to be taught but do want and need help. But even they cannot tell us yet just what help they need, in many cases. It is going to be up to us to work with them, individually and collectively, to find out. Different people and groups will need different things.

Here again, it is my conviction that the library approach to learning is broader, and more deeply true to the intensely individual quality of true learning, than most of what goes on in higher education. For in that field too, facilitators and so-called "Educational Brokers" have emerged in the past few years. But their function is to match up the individual with the right program among the many offerings of diverse postsecondary institutions. That is something that librarians often do very well, too, but librarians can go further than just putting a round peg in a round hole of the same size. Librarians can and do create, out of the infinite riches of resources for learning in all media, those from which a particular person, at a
particular point, can best benefit. Guided by such librarians, adult learners can truly cultivate their incredible diversity of learning styles:

* For some it will be access to co-learners;
* for others it will be awareness of media materials like cassettes or films or video courses;
* for others it will be finding opportunities for learning experiences or internships;
* for others it will be help with literacy and coping skills;
* for others it will be information about the place to which they are going to find a job, or the field they want to enter;
* for others it will be materials to aid their learning from a public television series like *The Shakespeare Plays*,(20) or *Connections*;(21)
* for others it will be guidance on how to prepare for CLEP (College Level Examination Program) or Regents External Degree examinations;
* for others it will be data on financial aid available for going back to college full-time, or for pursuing graduate work;
* for some it will be aid in clarifying the goals, or structuring, a personal learning project.

In conclusion, let me say that I see very specific prospects in the immediate future for a closer connection between the library world and that of adult education and lifelong learning. Richard Peterson, principal author of the definitive survey *Lifelong Learning in America,*(22)

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sees libraries as "the key facilitators of adult independent learning -- the pillars of the non-institutional sector of the future learning society." The Adult Education Association of the United States has had a task force prepare an important report on lifelong learning for adults through libraries, as the basis for its movement in this direction. (23) Elizabeth Stone, president-elect of the American Library Association, has expressed to me, both personally and officially, her deep conviction about the importance of adult learning services in libraries, and her intention to work hard on this during her tenure.

You, in this room, are on the cutting edge of this adventure in human development. You are working with the only inexhaustible resource available to us: the power within each person to shape and reshape the self, in ways large and small, to become more fully what we want to be. Men and women, rich and poor, young and old, are finding in this adventure of self-creation some of their most life-affirming pleasures. I wish you every success in helping our fellow Americans become the people they want and need to be.
