Meggan Press

Words matter

The power of language to create community

Pause for a moment and consider something tiny, yet absolutely fundamental to libraries. Consider the many words that we as a profession use to describe the people who use our libraries. Most of the words we use to refer to the people who use our libraries are transactional rather than relational. I've long had difficulty with most of these words, finding myself chafing against their usage, connotations, and general feeling. For instance, calling the people who use our libraries *customers* isn't right. We aren't selling products and they aren't buying. *Customer base, client,* or *consumer* are even further from the target, although I have seen these words used.

The word *patron* has possibilities. Its connotation of arts organizations feels simpatico. As a representation of an ancient practice, patrons use wealth and influence to support artists and arts organizations. This seems closer to the core of the issue, more charitable, but I dislike how the relationship is one-sided by definition. A patron is in one sense as "a person who gives financial or other support to a person, organization, cause, or activity."[1] In another, a patron is "one who buys the goods or uses the services offered especially by an establishment."[2] These definitions emphasize what patrons give and do, but do not include the role of the patronized establishment in the relationship. Also present in these definitions is the implication of financial transaction, which, once again, isn't quite the representation that feels core to librarianship.

And then there is the odd-man-out of words and definitions affiliated with *patron—patronizing*—which in itself has two definitions. The first definition seems okay: "to be a frequent or regular customer or client of."[3] The second is unacceptable: "to adopt an air of condescension toward."[4] It is the second definition that underlies many of the less generous assumptions about libraries in the general public: for instance, the fetishizing of knowledge connected to book learning, to the exclusion of other ways of learning and knowing. For those of us who work in academic libraries, these assumptions are compounded by general attitudes which view institutions of higher education as ivory towers full of know-it-alls divorced from reality. While I might concede that *patron* is an imperfect but acceptable choice of word, I would never want the less savory connotations of *patronizing* to be associated with the way that libraries treat patrons, nor with the way that patrons treat libraries.

Within these contexts, I can see how the field of librarianship landed on the word *user.* If you can't use the word *customer* or *patron,* what you're left with is something along the lines of "people who use the library." I think we can agree this is unwieldy. What is a "person who uses the library" but a *user?* This fits neatly into the modern UX leanings of libraries, allows cross-disciplinary understanding, and seems a superficially neutral way to describe the people coming through our doors. And yet, a user is a person who

Meggan Press is undergraduate education librarian at Indiana University-Bloomington, email: megpress@iu.edu

takes everything and gives nothing. A user is a vampire, sucking dry a host. Is this how we want to think about our people?

It is no surprise that underneath our word choices and within increasingly pressure-filled discussions to prove the value of libraries flows a quiet, largely unspoken undercurrent of financial transaction and commercialization. Even with a word as bland as *user,* we must acknowledge that within the context of UX in technology, users are a means to product adoption and, therefore, profit for the company. From the perspective of the patron/user, I have noticed that when people come up to the circulation desk they ask to *rent* items. The idea of borrowing, that there might be an exchange that does not involve money, isn't in the common lexicon. *Rent* not only implies a financial transaction but also a certain distance from the renting organization. You rent a car from an impersonal desk at the airport. You rent a movie from Redbox, a literal red box involving zero human interaction. Your obligation to those organizations is purely financial.

When you *borrow* or *lend,* however, there is a certain sense of social obligation and exchange. A wheelbarrow borrowed from a neighbor comes with it the expectation that a similar request might come your way in the future. Additionally, you are more likely to take care of the thing that you borrowed. It's your neighbor's, after all, and the social pressure of becoming known as the kind of person who trashes others' belongings is real. With borrowing comes a social contract. We rely on each other. We support each other. We hold each other accountable. The relationship goes both ways. The word to describe this kind of back-and-forth, joint accountability relationship on a large scale is *community.*

Community is personal. It implies character and quirks.

Community is inclusive. It positions the library itself as a member of the ecosystem.

Community is local. It helps us to think about the unique circumstances and particular connections that exist within our individual places. When we think this way, we are better able to design services and outreach to keep pace with our communities.

Best of all, *community* matches the ideals for which libraries stand. Among the core values of librarianship as established by ALA is the idea of libraries as a public good.[5] We cannot believe ourselves to be a public good while calling our people *users*. The implications present in that word position *public good* opposite "people who take but do not give," which is an unhealthy relationship if I've ever heard of one. The distance between *public good* and *user* is vast. Libraries cannot stand at a distance from our people and expect to survive. Libraries are members of a community. Calling the people who use our library *our community* or, in the singular, *community member* encompasses the actions that these people engage in, their function in the exchange of ideas, and the place of the library in the midst of it all.

They are just words, yet they drive our conceptual understandings and bind discourse communities. They are powerful. Careful word choice, especially for something as fundamental as the way we describe the people who use our libraries, is critical to setting the tone for the interactions that are the lifeblood of our organizations. So let us reconsider how we refer to the people who use libraries, and choose a word that moves away from transaction and truly represents the relationships we build. For me, that word is *community.*

Notes

1. "Patron, Definition of patron in English by Oxford Dictionaries," *Oxford Dictionaries,* English, accessed March 05, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/patron.

2. "Patron," *Merriam-Webster,* accessed March 05, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patron.

3. "Patronize," *Merriam-Webster,* accessed March 05, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patronize.

4. Ibid.

5. "Core Values of Librarianship," ALA, May 19, 2017, Accessed March 05, 2018, www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues.