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### Bernard Lonergan's Functional Specialties and Academic Libraries

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LISA ROSE-WILES

## Bernard Lonergan's Functional Specialties and Academic Libraries

### Abstract

I apply the framework of Bernard Lonergan's functional specialties to academic libraries. This process helped to identify and situate the challenges that libraries face today. These largely stem from historical changes that align with the three challenges to higher education that Lonergan identified in *Topics in Education* nearly 60 years ago: "the masses", "the new learning", and "increasing specialization". Despite lofty Mission Statements and Strategic Plans (policy making and planning), the foundations of today's academic libraries are unclear, largely because dialectics surrounding those historical changes have not been resolved. This has led to considerable concern about the future of academic libraries. I use my analysis and experiences from a three year exploration in "Applying the [Generalized Empirical] Method" in a first year Biology course to suggest ways to help librarians foster student research skills and expand their intellectual horizons.

### Introduction

My Praxis project in "Applying the [Generalized Empirical] Method" (ATM) involved being an "embedded librarian" in a first year General Biology class, working closely with another GEM fellow, Dr. Marian Glenn, over a three-year period (Rose-Wiles *et al.* 2017) My talk today will focus on my application of Lonergan's functional specialties to academic libraries, but I will integrate observations from my ATM that relate to some of the challenges facing academic libraries in the United States. Using the functional specialties as a framework helped me to clarify those challenges, especially their historical origins (I'm going to focus a lot on history here) and allowed me to situate my ATM in a larger context. I cannot offer easy solutions to the problems facing academic libraries, but my analysis and my ATM work suggest steps we can take to begin addressing them.

### Background: Academic Libraries

There are almost 120,000 libraries of all kinds in the United States, including about 4,000 academic libraries associated with colleges or universities. (American Library Association [ALA], 2015). Traditionally the library was the heart of any university, but libraries seem to be experiencing an identity crisis and loss of perceived value. The number of colleges and universities with libraries declined from 90% in 1998 to 82% in 2010 (National Center for Educational Statistics [CES], 2015a, 2015b).

Academic libraries are closely associated with or embedded within their parent institutions and support the university's mission as well as its curricular and research needs. These missions and needs vary across institutions, but despite the myriad of specialized functions and tasks that libraries and librarians perform, library services fall under two broad headings which I'll describe simply as "materials" and "education". "Materials" encompass obtaining, organizing, describing, preserving and providing access to information resources (traditionally books, but increasingly electronic resources). "Education" means teaching library users how to find, access and use information ("information literacy"), and increasingly how to use library-related technology. Both functions involve interacting

with faculty and students in many disciplines across the university, giving rise to the term “library liaison” which has largely replaced the older term “subject specialist”. I think Lonergan would have appreciated this idea of working across disciplines and trying to connect them through common core concepts.

I should distinguish between “Librarianship”, which is primarily a service-oriented profession (a Field Specialization) and “Library Science”, the subject matter or academic discipline of librarianship (a Subject Specialization). Essentially this is the distinction between librarians “doing what we do” and thinking and talking about it; of doing research and communicating the findings. “Library Science” should inform library practice and vice-versa: the practice and the discipline are intimately related, but this is not always the case.

So let me now attempt to place this “library science” broadly within the framework of Lonergan’s eight Functional Specialties.

### **Bernard Lonergan’s Functional Specialties and Academic Libraries**

#### **Research**

Most librarians are “practical people ... immersed in the particular and concrete [with] little grasp of large movements or long-term trends” (Lonergan 1971, p. 360). A lot of library research is reporting how we adopted a particular technology or workflow. We spend a great deal of time and energy gathering assessment-driven data such as usage statistics (for example, how many people use the library services; how often books circulate, how many times online articles are downloaded) and cost per use analyses, reflecting our preoccupation with “Return on Investment”. Library research in the educational domain centers on promoting and improving information literacy. Much of this involves testing and assessing instruction techniques or technology, but librarians do draw on broader educational theory and/or cognitive theory. A few such as Carol Kuhlthau (2004) develop new theories or models of information seeking and processing or take a philosophical approach to reflecting on library history, development, function, social engagement, or mission. My own past research has been mostly practical, but since becoming involved in Praxis I have become very interested in these larger philosophical issues – thus expanding my own horizon as a librarian.

#### **Interpretation**

In the same way that library research tends to be pragmatic, librarians tend to interpret their research within a rather limited practical horizon. Much of the time we gather and interpret data in order to demonstrate our “value” to ourselves, our users, and most of all to administrators of our institution who determine library funding. But interpreting data can also raise interesting questions. Transactions at the reference desk are declining, should we reduce our reference hours or do more outreach? Print book circulation is decreasing, should we buy fewer books? Do these trends mean today’s students are doing less reading or research than their predecessors? And a related question of great concern for many librarians and the focus of my ATM: most students don’t know how to do research – how can librarians help?

## History

The first academic institution in the United States was Harvard University, founded in 1638 and a copy of Cambridge's Emmanuel College. There was a library but it had very few books and was rarely open to or used by students (Kilgour, 1972). No real research was done until the 1820's, and books "suitable for undergraduates were segregated in the librarian's office" as late as 1854 (Kilgour, 1972, p. 78). However, by the late nineteenth century libraries were becoming more open and some librarians had begun to offer instruction in using the library rather than simply providing books on request (Weiner, 2005). This shift from "guardians of knowledge" to "knowledge facilitators" (Matheson & Welch, 2012) was probably the biggest single change facing academic libraries, and one we are still grappling with.

There have been many other changes in academic libraries in the last century, but I am going to focus on three that I find most significant. These fit very well with the three principle challenges to higher education that Lonergan identified in *Topics in Education* nearly 60 years ago (Lonergan, 2015). The first is the opening of higher education from a privileged few to what Lonergan termed "**The Masses**". From a library perspective this means no longer serving a small, select group of scholars but serving a large and diverse community of learners. This includes students pursuing professional or business degrees who may have little interest in classical liberal arts subjects or information literacy. We also have many first generation college students, English as a second language students, mature students, and students from many faiths and cultures. Many students come very poorly prepared for college level work.

I see this not just as a historical change but an ongoing dialectic that academic libraries must engage: how do we deal with this diversity, especially with limited budgets, staff and time. A compounding issue is a constellation of traits ascribed to the "Millennial" generation (Bourke & Mechler, 2010). I am wary of attempts to label an entire generation as "feeling entitled", "wanting instant results" and "obsessed with technology" but confess we see these traits in many of today's students.

To give some examples from my ATM, I found that many of our students have difficulty asking thoughtful research questions. They expect questions (and answers) to be given to them, or confuse "research question" with the more comfortable concept of "general topic" that they experienced in high school. In Lonergan's terms, they are reluctant to change their standpoint and move toward (philosophical) intellectual conversion by acknowledging that "knowing is a matter of raising and answering questions for intelligence" (Doran, 2011, p. 19).

Some students candidly admit to making strategic choices about how much effort to spend on assignments, or whether to do them at all, based on their "value" in terms of grade points. This is consistent with the corporate culture of efficiency permeating higher education today. In similar vein, many students will not read material or work through tutorials or practice exercises if they are not "worth points", even if the material would help them to do well on assignments that are graded. They prefer to restrict themselves to what they obviously must do rather than try to expand their horizons, a practice that librarians call "satisficing", meaning doing just what's "good enough" to succeed (Warwick et al., 2009). These tendencies are reinforced by reliance on technology for instant communication and clear and immediate answers – why puzzle through a question when you can simply "Google" the answer? These attitudes are sadly incompatible with the research process, which is complex and

involves working through doubt and confusion (Kuhlthau, 2004). They also do not fit well with Lonergan's GEM or the concept of intellectual integrity (Cronin, 2001, p.18).

In talking about student attitudes to research and learning I have strayed into the second of Lonergan's challenges in Higher Education, "**The New Learning**". The shift from traditional classical education to more empirical science and social science subjects has escalated with the growth of professional degree programs and the growing corporatization of Higher Education. In the United States, Higher Education is Big Business. Many administrators see students or "library users" as customers to be wooed -- and at least some students and parents perceive themselves in the same way.

Another aspect of the New Learning is the shift from lecture-focused teaching to experiential or "active" learning, meaning more focus on the way of Achievement and less on the way of Heritage. This is exciting but it is challenging to find a good balance between essential subject knowledge and self-guided discovery. Librarians see this in the assignments students bring to the reference desk and the emphasis on doing research rather than reading assigned texts -- often with little experience or guidance on how to actually do that research.

Another significant historical change for academic libraries is moving from well-defined collections of print books, journals and manuscripts to an array of online information resources which we must teach our students (and faculty) how to navigate. There is an ever-increasing reliance on technology, a huge driver of change in the way that academic libraries operate. Many library administrators seem to believe that if we keep up with the newest and trendiest technology all will be well -- a view that is strongly encouraged by those who sell the technology. But technology is also part of "The New Learning" because it has permeated and changed the entire learning environment and expectations of library users in both positive and negative ways. Ease of access to information is wonderful, but sifting through, understanding and evaluating a vast number of search results and choosing those that are appropriate can be overwhelming, especially for inexperienced students. Technology does not address the underlying problem of students not knowing how to do research, and reinforces their expectations for immediate and uncomplicated results. In Lonergan's terms, both academic libraries and students are becoming subsumed to "technological possibility" rather than value-based achievement (Lonergan, 1971, p. 45).

The third big historical change, and Lonergan's third "challenge in higher education" is **specialization**. Our academic institutions are increasingly changing from well-defined and cohesive entities to a patchwork of specialized and often isolated units and departments. Academic librarians struggle to serve a growing number of specialists who know more and more about less and less, and students who find it difficult to transfer knowledge from one domain to another. I saw this quite often during my ATM -- students seem to encapsulate learning about respiration, for example, as something unrelated to blood circulation, and rarely connected the readings from the Core Curriculum "Journey of Transformation" to their experiences in science classes.

## **Dialectics**

Dialectic can be divisive, leading to crisis (Lonergan 1971, p. 358) or healthy, leading to reconciliation, conversion, renewed foundations or policies (p. 365). The major dialectics for academic libraries stem from the historical "challenges to higher education". For example "do we open our resources to visitors" relates to historical changes in the openness of libraries and problem of the Masses. The perennial "do we give fish or teach fishing?" is a question about the New Education that

has many ramifications. What is the balance between the popular “meeting students where they are” (mimicking Google or Amazon) and teaching traditional research skills? Some librarians question teaching students how to use library databases and tools they will likely not have (or need) after they graduate. We disagree about how to teach across the disciplines, or even if we should, a question about specialization.

On a loftier plane, librarians argue about whether we should champion the pursuit of knowledge and truth (in Lonergan’s terms, demanding intellectual integrity and facilitating intellectual conversion) or concede the real world economics of education as a marketplace commodity, the Millennial Generation and the culture of “satisficing”. To quote from a paper that Mark Doorley from Villanova delivered at the 2007 Lonergan Workshop:

The university has become more of a tool of economics and politics than a center for the pursuit of truth. More and more, students come to the university as consumers. They are trying to find the least expensive and most efficient way to get the set of skills they need in order to operate successfully in the marketplace. Rather than come to university with the goal of self-appropriation, they come to prepare themselves to fulfill a task in the marketplace, a fulfillment that will enable them to become consumers to their hearts’ content. (Doorley, 2007, p.3.)

Meanwhile librarians argue with administrators and investors in the hopes of convincing them that libraries are important, effective, give good return on investment, support the university mission and deserve more funding. Increasingly it seems that academic libraries are no longer the heart of the institution, but instead are seen as an expense.

### **Foundations.**

I am using “Foundations” here in the sense of being built from “a decision about whom and what you are for ... a fully conscious decision about one’s horizon” (Lonergan, 1971, p. 268). I believe that today’s academic libraries lack solid foundations. This is mainly because critical dialectics have not been resolved, but also because for many libraries, the corporate culture in Higher Education has made competing for limited funding their overwhelming priority. This position may offer a shared Horizon, it is a limited and limiting one, eroding rather than supporting a framework for Policies, Plans and Communication.

### **Doctrines - Policies**

The [American Library Association Code of Ethics](#) proclaims that libraries “provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests”. That sounds wonderful, but rather remote from the reality of library life; abstractly conceived rather than concretely operating.

### **Systematics – Plans**

[SHU Libraries Strategic Plan](#) [We] “support excellence in academic and individual work, enable inquiry, foster intellectual and ethical integrity and respect for diverse points of view through user-focused services and robust collections. It’s beautifully crafted, but again it does seem rather abstract.

[ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#) proposes that “librarians have a greater responsibility in identifying core ideas within their own knowledge domain that can extend learning for students.” This is closer to my premise that librarians have a key role in helping students to expand their horizons by engaging intellectually in the research process (beginning with asking through provoking questions) rather than pursuing the “utilitarian and pragmatic purpose” goal of getting a grade and passing a course (Doran, 2011, p.8).

## Communication

This is the province of library science: talking about what we do; how and why we do it, and what we should do. But academic librarians often do not communicate well with those outside the library. Many librarians publish meaningful and important work, but I doubt any non-librarians read library journals. It is important that librarians gain a wider academic audience, but it is vital that libraries establish firm foundations so that we can better communicate who we are and what we do.

## The Functional Specialties, GEM, and the Way Forward

So what is the core function of academic librarians and libraries? Clearly we need to provide abundant (or at least adequate) scholarly resources for students and faculty, but providing resources is futile if those resources are not used. It is not enough to show students and faculty what resources we have and how to access them, we must show them why they need to use them, which becomes a dialog about doing research. Ultimately we need to foster **intellectual conversion** in our students. We need to guide them from “a naïve view of oneself and reality” ... toward “intellectual acts of understanding and true judgement” (Liddy, 2009, p. 2), so that “questions regarding meaning and truth are pursued for their own sake” (Doran, 2011, p. 8). This transformation is a long and often painful process, but we can make a start by igniting the sparks of curiosity that lead to good questions. Lonergan asserts that the desire for knowledge and truth is intrinsic in all of us, but it can be stifled by personal circumstances or cultural conventions. Librarians and teaching faculty can work together to engender a sense of wonder in our students, by helping them to see that the world is full of fascinating questions that understanding the scholarly literature can help them to answer. We need to make them comfortable asking fruitful questions and exploring them, and combat their desire to have questions and answers handed to them or made immediately and easily discoverable.

Together librarians and faculty can help to convince students that doing good research is immensely rewarding even when it is difficult, time consuming and frustrating, and encourage them to reflect on their experiences and expand their horizons beyond simply passing a test or getting a degree. I have learned through my ATM that students ignore what they see as “busy work” or assignments with little value, so we must design assignments carefully and make their purpose clear. We must also understand and nurture the critical relationship between lectures and readings as a conduit for foundational knowledge (the way of heritage) and assignments and experiments as experiential learning (the way of achievement). Crowe (1985) sums up this complexity with penetrating simplicity: “the integration of the two ways ... is of course the goal of education” (p.3).

We found using the GEM framework helpful in structuring students’ approach to research and writing, and we used it to design our grading rubrics (Figure 1). GEM can be used to frame library research and information literacy in any discipline, helping librarians to counter the problem of specialization (Figure 2). If we can convince at least some of our students to develop the habits of being attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible, it will have a positive effect on the next generation of

leaders and educators. If we acknowledge that the primary function of academic libraries is to foster student research in ways that encourage intellectual conversion, we will have made a great step forward.

The great challenge is convincing current faculty and administrators that this is a worthwhile endeavor. This is a challenge that Lonergan recognized when he referred to the “far more arduous task ... of persuading eminent and influential people to consider the advance both thoroughly and fairly” (Lonergan, 1971, p. 366). If we can do that, we may not achieve Crowe’s “Copernican revolution” but we might turn a few heads and hearts in the right direction.

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Figure 1: GEM Based Grading Rubric for Annotated Bibliography Assignments

Grading aspect	Exceeded expectations	Good	Satisfactory	Need significant improvement
Information sources (Data - "Experience")	>3 peer reviewed articles and good additional sources OR 3 peer reviewed articles and excellent additional sources (4 points)	3 peer-reviewed articles with no additional sources OR 2 peer-reviewed articles and good or excellent additional sources (3 points)	2 peer-reviewed articles, no additional sources or poor additional sources (2 points)	One or no peer-reviewed articles (0 or 1)
Annotation (Understanding)	Relevant key points for all sources provided and clearly explained, clear evidence of understanding the material (2 points)	Relevant key points provided and most are clearly explained (1.5 points)	Some key points provided but not clearly explained (1 points)	Relevant key points poorly explained, not explained or not provided (0-0.5)
Selection of sources (Judgment)	Specific reasons given for selecting all sources, clear evidence of reflecting on choices (2 points)	Reasons given for selecting all sources (1.5 points)	Only simple or general reasons given (1 points)	Only some or no reasons given (0-0.5)
Citations (Responsible / Action)	all citations listed in alphabetical order, correct APA style, no missing elements	Minor citation errors (1.5)	Significant citation errors (1)	Major citation errors or no citations (0-0.5)

Figure 2: GEM-based introduction to first year biology library research presentation

### Researching your topic

**Google – Surface Skimming**



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**Library Resources – Dive Deep**



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### Our Research Framework: Bernard Lonergan's Generalized Empirical Method (GEM)

- Experience (be Attentive)
- Understanding (be Intelligent)
- Judging (be Reasonable)
- Acting (be Responsible)



### EXPERIENCE ⇔ be ATTENTIVE



The first step is to find information sources that will help you to research your topic and answer or refine your questions.

... Reading your sources (⇒ EXPERIENCE) will probably lead to additional questions and may even change your original questions – but that's fine. That's how research is supposed to work.

Aim to compile 6-12 sources that look interesting in a folder. (I will show you how to do that).

### UNDERSTANDING ⇔ be INTELLIGENT

So far you've probably just looked at the abstracts of the articles you have chosen, but for your recitation you need a deeper understanding of the material you will be presenting. So dive in to the full text, read the discussion and/or conclusion, note interesting points and look for tables or figures that you can use to illustrate your presentation.



### JUDGING ⇔ be REASONABLE



Now you need to evaluate the sources you have gathered. Which will work best for your recitation?

- Which are the most relevant to your questions?
- Are your sources **authoritative**?
- Is the information up to date?

Did you include at least 3 peer-reviewed sources? (we'll discuss this more)

### ACTING ⇔ be RESPONSIBLE

Now that you have chosen your sources, you will cite them in an **annotated bibliography** (due next week).

You are responsible for following the guidelines, presenting and citing your sources correctly – making ethical use of information.





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