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Abstract
What does "brevity" evoke in today's academic library? In this paper, I explore the notion of brevity with my colleagues at the University of Guelph Library, asking them what the term evokes for them in the library and higher education more broadly.
This paper reveals a clash of values and ideologies which may well point to one of the more universal tensions within higher education today.

This paper explores what "brevity" means for a group of academic librarians and staff working at the University of Guelph. I asked 16 librarians and academic staff what this word evokes for them in the context of their work in the library and their experience of the university.

Through these conversations, I came to understand more fully some of the values attached to brevity, both positive and negative, but rarely neutral. These discussions about brevity revealed a clash of values and beliefs about the meaning of higher education and the purpose of the university.

Keeping it brief

The majority of the people I interviewed had an immediately positive response to the idea of brevity. They told me that brevity means "getting to the point," "getting the work done" "using words efficiently" "respecting people's time" and "communicating for the reader or listener and not for one's own glorification." They pointed out that brevity is a noble goal but that – paradoxically—it often takes more time and effort to be brief. They told me that it is worth the extra investment to prepare a brief email, craft a brief document, or run a short, but well-planned meeting because these actions demonstrate respect for other people's time and lead to clarity, efficiency, and productivity. "If I had had more time, I would have written a shorter letter," quipped one colleague, citing Pascal, and another pointed to a large poster of Einstein on the wall behind her desk with the quote, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't know it well enough." One co-worker pointed out that we now live in a culture where much of our reading happens on a screen and the nature of screen reading is to skim and scan. We must adapt to this culture by learning to write less and get our message across succinctly.

Brevity is a laudable goal, but "it's not easy," one colleague told me, "because you're trying to translate concepts from your head and put them in concrete words and that makes communicating briefly a challenge." Another told me, "I'm on the side of brevity, for sure, but having said that, I don't think I do it very well. I'm wordy. Verbose. I feel like sometimes more words provide clarity and I don't want people to misunderstand me."

Brevity is not only difficult; it can also be risky. A coworker told me: "I try to be concise but end up doing the opposite. I'm trying to cover myself for any eventuality, looking for ways people might respond and being careful to anticipate them. You want to make sure people know you've considered every angle."

Another made this point: "We have a culture of always consulting with each other, consulting and over consulting, making sure everyone's comfortable, so it's really hard to be brief or get to the point quickly. I think brevity is also about risk taking--to be comfortable to try something and move forward to achieve something quickly."

Brevity requires trust. A colleague told me:

> If you want to get to a point quickly, you must have good understanding and rapport with your colleagues. You don't need to beat around the bush or couch your words because you're comfortable enough with each other to speak frankly. Brevity also requires trust in your own instincts and expertise, that every time you want to make a change or try something new, you don't need an extensive literature review and analysis of the evidence and all the data. Instead, you can take a smart step in the right direction, test that and go from there. The library, and the university culture more broadly more often puts its faith in long studies, careful consideration of all information, and consensus building. But this approach often does not lead to timely, important decision making. It does not make us a responsive and flexible organization. For example, we have a peer review system for performance reviews where there are two committees made up of nine people in total who spend several months every year reviewing librarians' performance. The outcome of this review often means only a minor difference of a few hundred dollars in librarians' salaries at the end of the process. And the review of librarians with continuing appointment only happens every two years so we can't be nimble about addressing issues in performance. But we value this process, even though the effort put into it is completely out of line with the outputs we get.

Clearly some of my colleagues feel that the workplace culture at the University of Guelph Library, and indeed, library culture in general struggles to achieve brevity. Yet one could argue that brevity is at the very heart of librarianship. Much of traditional librarianship is about creating metadata. Libraries describe, control, and organize information by creating abstracts, catalogue records, indexes and call numbers which summarize larger works as concisely as possible. Reference librarians learn just enough about how different disciplines work to help our users find what they need, but we don't (and we couldn't) learn every subject in depth.

On the other hand, librarians tend to love words, explication, analysis, and to err on the side of comprehensiveness rather than conciseness. This is true all the more so for librarians in an academic environment where detail, nuance, context, and sometimes deliberate obscurity are cherished. We may think it's desirable to write shorter reports, hold briefer meetings, wrap up projects more efficiently, and solve problems more quickly, but it's an uphill battle. "Overanalyzing is an occupational hazard," a colleague told me. "Some of us are afraid that if we simplify things too much something will be lost or misinterpreted. We're people in love with information and the labyrinthine paths it takes you."

I heard almost the same sentiment from another coworker who said, "Brevity? Actually, the library profession is very guilty of this problem. We can't be brief. We have access to all the information at our fingertips and we want to tell everyone how to access everything. But being

able to pull out what's essential is a challenge. Maybe it's in the academic professions in general. I've seen it's a challenge for some philosophers and historians I know."

Another colleague told me:

> We over-provide and over-inform. We don't value our own expertise to select for our users; instead we think we need to give them everything so they have equal access to everything. Some library staff believe if we don't do that, we're at risk of dumbing things down. It drives me insane that some people think that being student-centred is the opposite of being academic. They say we aren't here to give students what they want but to help them learn what they need, so they teach with PowerPoint filled with 6,000 slides to make sure they include everything. They cram every single detail they can think of when they create 'help' pages on the website.

And still another:

> Most of our colleagues talk far too much and far too long. Meetings don't finish on time. Most people have been brought up on the tonnage model of education: the more pages you write the better. We want to be comprehensive, to do big literature reviews, to make sure we're getting everything instead of solving the problem at hand. If you present a two-page report, people think you haven't done anything; yet we always provide an Executive Summary since no one reads the full report anyway! Look at the debate about what makes good reference service. Some librarians think the more information we can provide the better, rather than giving people just what they need. And look how we measure things in libraries in terms of tonnage. A bigger library is a better library.

A critique of brevity

Not everyone I spoke to was as enthusiastic about brevity. For them, "brevity" connotes terseness and even rudeness, as in the expression "to be short with someone." At a deeper level, brevity suggests an anti-intellectual stance and the corporatization of education. My anti-brevity coworkers saw a push toward brevity in the university as an assault on engaged discourse, on the humanities, and on the educational mission of the university. As one colleague put it:

> It makes me angry. It makes me really angry. It's a corporate idea of things, but like Oscar Wilde said, the truth is rarely simple or pure. A lot of things can't be boiled down to a brief 'whatever'. At work we are forced to be about productivity, the elevator speech. It's anti-intellectual. Maybe it's good for advertising slogans, but it pisses me off because it's encouraged as a notion to strive for, and it's got a lot to do with money, keeping it short just to get things over with. It's about focusing and getting to the point but not really saying anything. [I think] great ideas are generated by babbling, by people feeling free to spout forth to get to some fount of knowledge. It's not about getting it over with. It's about passion and being engaged. If you're brief, you're probably not engaged. I once worked with someone who would always

say to me 'broad strokes, I just want to hear the broad strokes.' He didn't want to hear all the details, but I see the connections between people and ideas in the details.

Then she paused for a couple of beats, and said, "On the other hand, to be concise takes a lot of thought. And with a lot of people I wish they would be brief!"

A similar sentiment was expressed by another colleague that brevity can cut short the possibility for exploring ideas. "I enjoy the unfolding conversation. I like writing out my ideas, inserting my voice, getting across my point, and getting a response in return," she said. She told me she deliberately writes long emails, and even enjoys writing old-fashioned letters. She abhors the trend toward snippets of conversation as seen on sites like Twitter and Facebook because they encourage sharing trivial, in-the-moment comments that are often ill-considered and poorly expressed. "Not everything needs to be communicated! They're quick forms of communication so people don't think about what they're communicating. You're in the moment, it's instantaneous. You just pound it out and put it out there, but it's not a real conversation."

One of the strongest voices to question to value of brevity in academia was a colleague who told me:

> There's a value placed on efficiency in the West that is assumed to be a universal value so it's imposed on the rest of the world. It's about a denigration of theory, philosophy, and humanity, about not wanting to question deeper assumptions or allow for longer and irresolvable conversations about meaning. It's a desire for practical, technical solutions, especially in the library. We have an emphasis on efficiency in discourse, which is a part of a larger set of global processes on how power relations play out. We lose sight of the value of listening and learning from others, of the value of serendipity and how the journey can be just as valuable as the destination. Value is placed on pragmatic, technical solutions--and this is well documented as a bias in library literature. When librarians try to take up philosophical issues, they are criticized for raising problems without suggesting solutions and policy recommendations. The broader academy suffers from this too; an example of this is the attack on science by the Harper government. Basic science which asks questions without applications and solutions is not funded. I think brevity is related to a constellation of ideas related to the practical, the technical, the industrial--it's about producing the most units with the least inputs. At work I'm self conscious about being long winded because of the value placed on brevity.

Another colleague thought that certain trends in higher education were leading to an abbreviated experience of university. Large classes, online courses, and mechanized assessment methods like computerized multiple choice exams mean that students and instructors never get to know each other much less develop any kind of mentoring or nurturing relationships. High tuition rates and a dismal job market mean that many students are focused on the most expedient and direct path to graduation. Sometimes it seems the university is in the business of "producing" graduates and students are in the business of just "getting through."

The preceding comments point to contemporary critiques of the "corporatization" of higher education. As universities embrace the values of the corporate sector, there is a perception that efficiency and economy are prevailing, at the cost of more traditional—but much slower--academic activities like exploration and contemplation. Paul Gibbs (2011) writes that universities are experiencing "a reduction of 'timeless time' (time not controlled by external constraints; time for reflective thought) and an increase in 'scheduled time' with its external imposition and accelerating pace" (p. 53). Similarly, Olssen & Peters (2005) describe the new public management approach to higher education which focuses on neoliberal values of efficiency, rationalization, and a focus on outputs.

I too am sympathetic with this view and worry about the changing nature of university education; however, I still think brevity has much to recommend it. For me, brevity means giving space to others to respond, to learn, and to grow. Paul Grice, a philosopher of language, devised four maxims of effective, cooperative communication. Two of these maxims deal with brevity. The Maxim of Quantity stipulates that speakers contribute only the amount of information that is required, and no more, to move the conversation along. The Maxim of Manner states "avoid obscurity, avoid ambiguity, be orderly, and be brief" (cited in Doerge, 2013).

When I strive toward brevity, I strive toward the essential and the meaningful. When I strive toward brevity I defy the vision of education that still thinks that students are empty vessels to be filled. Brevity rails against the non-essential, against filling time, against boredom, against self-indulgent long-windedness and against agonizing repetition. Brevity guards against overconsumption and waste as brevity can be applied to space and things, as well as time. Brevity is economy. Brevity is minimalism. Brevity implies a compact intensity, power, and urgency.

I think sometimes we in the library fear brevity because if libraries were easier to navigate, if finding the best and most relevant information were simpler, if we were able to help people quickly and efficiently, our expertise and value as information professionals would be questioned even more than it already is. In a way, embracing brevity can feel like exposing ourselves as having little to offer. If we eschew brevity, we puff ourselves up in the conceit that we have special access to knowledge and information.

A colleague told me that in his view, the culture of traditional academia values intense self-centredness where one's own research is the centre of the universe. In this culture, talking excessively about your own work is socially acceptable and helps to define your place as an insider in the university culture. Scholars who seek to translate their work into clear, simple, and plain language to communicate to those outside of their narrow field are sometimes seen as undermining their own intellectual credibility. Instead, the true intellectual is hard to understand, shrouded a cloak of complexity and protected by the status that comes with a PhD and a tenured position.

It is interesting to note that during my conversations with colleagues the question often came up, "What is the opposite of brevity?" All of the possible options had a negative taint: loquaciousness, droning, rambling, wordiness, redundancy, verboseness, tediousness, prolixity, long-windedness, excessiveness, waste, obscurity.

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