

Libraries help users narrate their **life stories**

People are their stories. We know this because time documents all our actions and events which string together to form a story of ourselves – stories of individuals, and collective shared stories of communities. **YEN WONG** explains how this applies to libraries.

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur tells us in his three volumes of *Time and Narrative* that stories are lived, and that narrative is the structure of human experience through time. He calls this narrative structure a mimesis, which consists of three phases: prefiguration (describing the stories that are being lived out), configuration (creatively organising from a diversity of events and actions to construct a coherent story), and refiguration (re-authoring one's own narrative).

This creative process forms the basis to how we act and go about our daily lives. Narrative is the driving force behind how we think, feel, and imagine. Individuals are narrators narrating the story of their life. Understanding the narrative mimesis enables us to appreciate the capacity of individuals to transform themselves and the way they live through stories.

Importantly, libraries need to acknowledge the uniqueness of their users – complex, dynamic, evolving beings at a certain stage and development in life, living in a certain situated context, possessing a life with a past, a present and future filled with ambitions, hopes, and dreams. It would be worthwhile to consider just 'who' is behind the face, 'who' is the customer with whom we've made an exchange of transactions, 'who' is the agent? Have we adequately met their need? Helped them understand a little better about themselves, their problems? Have we assisted them reach the most appropriate solution to their problem? Are libraries helping their users narrate their stories?

The narrative mimesis as described by Ricoeur is a process of individuals drawing upon their knowledge to



'A life examined is a lie narrated'
Source: Wong, Y (2018). *Wutai Shan, China: April 2018*

interpret their experience by composing a story to formulate their understanding. The nature of the process by can be considered as learning.

Informed Learning by Christine Bruce offers a holistic way to understanding how people use information to learn in all aspects of our lives. Thinking of library users as informed learners, and as identities and characters in an unfolding story, offers libraries a new perspective to how we engage with our users more appropriately.

When people visit libraries (either physically or virtually), they come to solve problems. It might be preparing for an exam, researching their family tree, resolving a family dispute, or just looking for a good book to while away the hours – whatever the need, be it big or small, libraries can help facilitate users in creating their own stories with greater awareness, paving a way to learning how to reinvent their circumstances, and be creative agents of their own becoming.

Using these concepts we can reassess and realign our practices in making our customers' visits a more meaningful experience. ✳

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