

Are Students in the Humanities Making Less Use of Printed Books? A Longitudinal Study at the University of Queensland Library

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Date: 10 January 2011

Background

It is a truism that students in the humanities are much more dependent on books (monographs) than students in most other disciplines. Many studies of researchers in the humanities have shown that books have been, and continue to be, indispensable for humanities research. University academics encourage their students to make use of the book literature and university libraries acquire multiple copies of popular titles to support student demand.

However anecdotal evidence suggests that student use of books is declining. The rapid growth of electronic journals (and especially of resources such as JSTOR) has provided a convenient alternative to the monograph, and one that is accessible from any computer with an Internet connection, at any time of the day or night. Other online resources (including the much-maligned Wikipedia) also provide alternative sources of information. Whether or not these alternative sources are as suitable for student use (or as authoritative), we know that students are using them heavily, and we suspect that this has a lot to do with their accessibility. By way of contrast, the student who wishes to use a printed book must make a visit to the campus library, locate the book on the shelf, either use it in the library (which may involve photocopying relevant pages) or borrow it and take it home (which entails an obligation to return the book by the due date or risk a penalty).

The rise of the e-book is another phenomenon which is clearly having an impact on the use of the printed book. Although only a limited number of e-books is available for purchase on web-based platforms suitable for academic libraries, the range of material available increases every year and students are becoming more familiar with e-books and making more use of them.

The present small-scale study at the University of Queensland Library was undertaken over a period of five years in an attempt to determine whether or not usage of printed books in the

humanities is declining. The University of Queensland is one of the largest universities in Australia and recently celebrated its centenary. In 2010, 5998 students were enrolled in the Arts Faculty. The Library has a collection totalling over two million volumes.

Methodology

There is no simple way to determine if usage of books in the humanities is declining. It would be difficult to extract from the library management system figures for circulation of all humanities monographs, so some sort of sampling procedure is required.

One could choose a sample of books and study their circulation over a period of years, but the obvious flaw in that procedure is that the usage of a book normally declines as the book ages (although this is less so in the humanities than in other disciplines).

The procedure adopted for the present study was to choose four humanities disciplines (based on the Library of Congress classification), and for each discipline obtain circulation data, year by year, for all books in the University's Social Sciences and Humanities Library which had been published three years previously to the survey year. The circulation data was collected over a period of five years. Books that were non-circulating or on restricted loan were not included in the survey.

By surveying books published three years previous to the survey year, it was hoped to obtain data on books that would be likely to have circulated (because they would be considered by potential users to have up-to-date information), and which had probably been acquired before the beginning of the survey year (to ensure that each title had experienced a full year's circulation activity).

However when surveying circulation of a sample of books that varies from year to year, there are clearly factors that could distort the results and potentially invalidate the findings. Variations in course offerings, or fluctuations in enrolments in particular courses, could have an impact on circulation figures. Similarly the Library may have purchased more (or more useful) books in some years. Even the acquisition of a few very popular books in certain years could distort results. All of these factors must be borne in mind when evaluating the survey results.

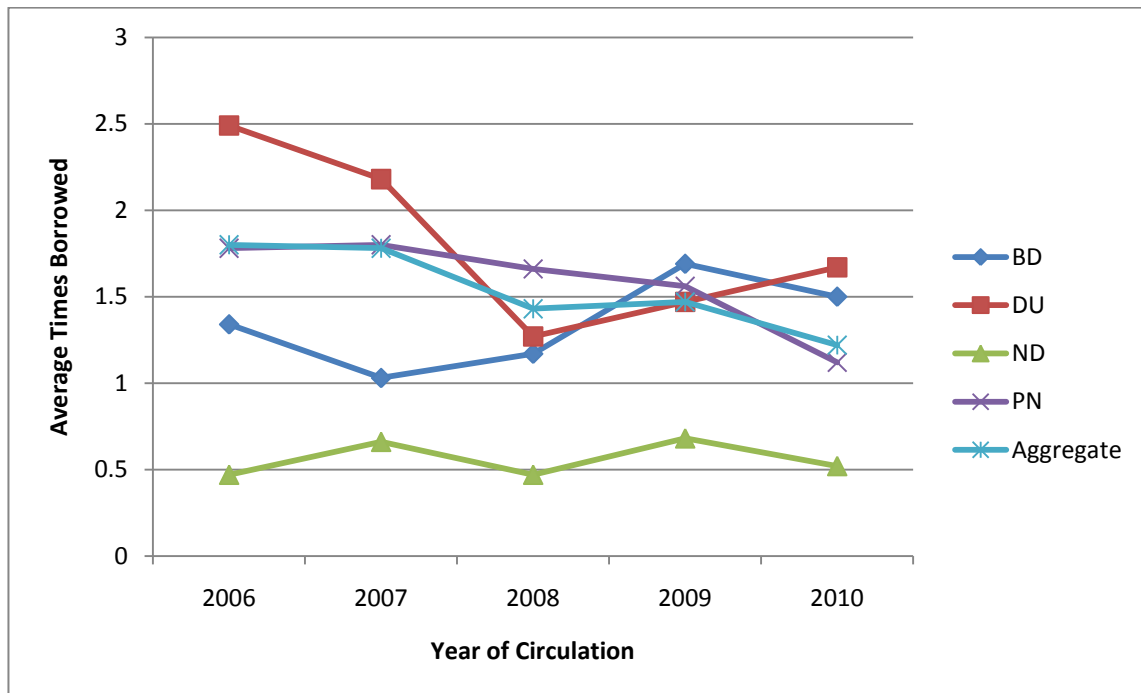
The four disciplines chosen for study (using the Library of Congress classification) were BD (Speculative Philosophy), DU (History of Oceania, including Australia), ND (Painting) and PN (Literature in General and Mass Media). It was hoped that these four somewhat different disciplines would give a valid picture of the situation in the humanities as a whole.

Results

Results of the survey are shown in the following table.

Classification	2006		2007		2008		2009		2010	
	Volumes in Sample	Average Loans	Volumes in Sample	Average Loans	Volumes in Sample	Average Loans	Volumes in Sample	Average Loans	Volumes in Sample	Average Loans
BD	70	1.34	39	1.03	52	1.17	42	1.69	46	1.5
DU	199	2.49	242	2.18	275	1.27	289	1.47	267	1.67
ND	70	0.47	71	0.66	62	0.47	82	0.68	95	0.52
PN	584	1.78	564	1.8	533	1.66	604	1.56	627	1.12
Aggregate	923	1.8	916	1.78	922	1.43	1017	1.47	1035	1.22

The circulation figures are plotted in the following graph.



Analysis

The fact that average circulation figures do not fluctuate wildly from year to year would seem to suggest that the methodology used is reasonably sound.

The results are far from conclusive, but the general trend is downward. The only discipline where we can discern some upward trend is BD (Speculative Philosophy). As discussed previously, there are many factors that could distort the results, but the aggregate trend seems to be definitely downward.

Conclusion

Although the data from the last five years do not allow us to make unequivocal statements about the usage of printed books in our humanities collection, it does appear that usage is slowly declining.

If the usage of printed books in the humanities is declining, what implications does that have for our practices and policies?

There is no question of ceasing to purchase books in the humanities. Books remain the most important vehicle for publication of humanities scholarship. Admittedly there is evidence of growth in the relative importance of the academic journal as a vehicle for publication in the humanities: this trend probably results both from the increasingly problematic economics of book publishing and from the incentives towards journal publication which seem to be built into the research evaluation exercises which are now a fact of academic life in many countries.

But if there is no question of ceasing to purchase printed books in the humanities, we can certainly look at reducing the purchase of multiple copies of such books. We should also be actively reviewing our humanities collection to look for duplicate copies which can be discarded or little used material which should be relegated to off-site storage.

If we suspect that one factor in the decline in borrowing of humanities monographs is the inconvenience of the print format for today's students, we should do everything that we can to increase our holdings of e-books in the humanities, as more such works become available.

It is hoped that the survey described in this report will be continued so that we can follow trends over the coming years.