

Evidence In Support of Keeping an On-site Library Collection at the iSchool Inforum

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Research favours print for reading comprehension and information recall

Contrary to predictions from a decade ago, when popular media declared that print was dying, current academic research in the information and education disciplines have shown that print reading is not only preferred over digital reading, but that print reading yields better recall and comprehension among students. Recent studies in the neurosciences corroborate this point, as scientists have found that print reading yields greater cognitive benefits than digital reading, even though digital texts are perceived to be more convenient to access. These are all important points to consider for any academic library, but especially one situated within the iSchool of a world class, research-intensive university, where the academic success of students is heavily weighted.

University students overwhelmingly prefer to read in print instead of digital format, for both schoolwork and for pleasure reading (Baron, 2017; Baron, Calixte, & Havewala, 2016). In a mixed method study of 429 university students across the United States, Germany, Slovakia, India, and Japan, Baron, Calixte and Havewala (2016), researchers well-known for their work in the area of language and reading, found that 94% of respondents preferred to read in print format, when both print and digital formats were available for the same resource, and especially for longer passages of text. In the same study, qualitative responses showed that students preferred the print format for its ease of annotation and tactility, even though the print format may be less convenient than the digital format. Students acknowledged the convenience of keyword searching and following hyperlinks found in digital texts, but they also expressed that digital reading caused eyestrain and distraction (Baron et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, researchers from the University of Maryland have found that while undergraduate students, many of whom self-identify as digital natives, stated a preference for digital formats and predicted better comprehension when reading digital text, actual research results showed that digital reading negatively impacted students' reading comprehension and ability to recall key points, as compared to reading from print (Singer & Alexander, 2017). The authors of this particular study also cited previous research by other researchers that has confirmed that digital multitasking contributes to more frequent switching of activities during screen reading, "more superficial processing" of text, and hampered ability to read critically or analytically (Singer & Alexander, 2017, p. 156).

Similarly, scientists working in the fields of neuroscience and cognitive science have found that print reading in fact offers "significant advantages" over digital reading, including better recall of the information read, deeper reading comprehension, sustained attention, and willingness to engage in the content of the text. These findings were consistent across various studies, ranging from one that examined tenth grade readers to another that evaluated the effectiveness of print versus digital advertisements on a targeted market audience (Perbal, 2017).

Students use libraries for reading

The growing body of literature on print versus digital reading has strong implications for academic libraries. Digital resource collections are ever expanding, as library print budgets shrink. The increasing volume of digital resources means that now, more than ever, students need spaces within libraries in which to do focused reading, free of distractions, as much as they need library spaces in which to collaborate and create. Researchers from the UBC iSchool have already studied the effect of the textual environment on reading comprehension (Freund, Kopak, & O'Brien, 2016). Freund et al. (2016) have found that for most students who read from any form of digital text, the simplest textual environment—that is, plain text—was associated with the highest level of reader comprehension, regardless of personal preferences. They also reference a research study conducted of Oxford University students that found that students develop “conscious strategies to avoid distractions by downloading and reading offline, or by reading in the library” (Keller, as cited by Freund et al., 2016, p. 81).

Knowing of this research, academic libraries have an even greater responsibility to maintain a hybrid print-and-digital environment:

“Instead of pursuing the creation of digital or bookless libraries, academic librarians should focus on maintaining hybrid collections, containing both print and digital materials. Such holdings should be rooted firmly in the realization that print and digital are distinct yet complementary formats, each serving a different type of user need. To best serve the needs of our institutions, we must support the full spectrum of reading and research” (Durant & Horava, 2015, p. 17).

The UTL catalogue is a channel for iSchool promotion: personal staff experience

The Inforum print collection continues to draw non-iSchool borrowers every year through their library catalogue searches. These non-iSchool users include University of Toronto students, prospective applicants to the iSchool, faculty members from other departments, and scholars and practitioners outside of the university. Maintaining a lendable print collection on-site that is listed in the UTL catalogue has effectively promoted the iSchool, as each year that I have worked for the iSchool (2005-present), I have assisted borrowers who tell me that they “never knew this Faculty existed” and ask “what is the iSchool?” These interactions become opportunities to tell the borrower about the iSchool’s academic programs and the types of careers that iSchool graduates obtain. Best of all, because these other borrowers independently discover the iSchool through the library catalogue at their point of need, there is no marketing material for them to tune out.

Key recent iSchool governance documents that support maintaining the print collections in the Inforum

Task Force on Information Services Final Report (2013)

https://inforum.library.utoronto.ca/sites/inforum.library.utoronto.ca/files/ridley_tfis_final_report_may_2013_final-approved-by-isc.pdf

The Task Force specifically recommends having the collection on the 4th floor of the Inforum “for improved accessibility” (#1.3.2, p. 19) as part of an **integrated** vision of what a 21st century digitally-enabled information lab should be.

Report of the “New Partnerships with the Central Library” Work Group for Presentation to Faculty Council (March 20, 2015)

https://web.archive.org/web/20150428102906/http://current.ischool.utoronto.ca/system/files/news/10.3_new_partnerships_utl_wg.pdf

This report, the joint effort of selected iSchool and UTL members, was presented at and accepted by Faculty Council at its March 2015 meeting. The report articulated these 6 principles:

1. **Keep the collections, including course reserves, within the Bissell Building**
2. Keep all Inforum staff and services within the Inforum
3. Move to the University of Toronto Libraries’ model by setting up an approval plan with YBP
4. Build labs on the 5th floor of the Inforum; Information Services Committee to develop the criteria for the labs on the 5th floor
5. Renovate the 4th floor of the Inforum to increase collaborative areas and independent study space, as well as incorporate office/cubical space for staff
6. Last year’s Inforum renovation group, consisting on [sic] Glenn Cumming, Glen Menzies, and Information Services staff will be reconstituted.

iSchool Strategic Plan 2012-2017

https://ischool.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ischool_strategicplan2012-17-1.pdf

Strategic Plan mentions in Goal 1: “increasing integration of the Inforum into Faculty planning and initiatives” (p. 17)

References

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