

# Teenagers in school libraries! What about the imaginaries and expectations of digital natives?

---

**Anne Cordier**

Rouen University

France,

[anne.cordier@univ-rouen.fr](mailto:anne.cordier@univ-rouen.fr)

## **Abstract**

*On an international scale, a new form of documentary mediation has merged, which is embodied in the structural and physical evolution of documentary spaces. In France, the school library (le "Centre de Documentation et d'Information": CDI) is under the responsibility of a teacher-librarian. He is in charge of teaching students information literacy along with managing the library. Students are welcome to the CDI when they do not attend classes and want to read or need to search information, but also in educational sessions led by the teacher-librarian. At a time when teenagers are referred to as "digital natives", what are their expectations in the school library? How to conceive school libraries so that to help youngsters achieve autonomy in the Information and Communication society?*

**Keywords:** Young people, information practices, documentary space, mediation

## **Introduction**

On an international scale, a new form of document mediation has merged, which is embodied in the structural and physical evolution of document spaces. The quest for autonomy of users-learners appears as a goal for the educational / epistemic institutions that school and the libraries are. Autonomy when searching for information seems to have become a kind of proof of personal accomplishment in our societies. In France, the school library (le "Centre de Documentation et d'Information": CDI) is under the responsibility of a teacher-librarian (professeur documentaliste) who is in charge of teaching students information literacy on the one hand and managing the library on the other hand. Students are welcome to the CDI when they do not attend classes and want to read or need to search information, but also in educational sessions led by the teacher-librarian.

At a time when teenagers are referred to as "digital natives" (Barlow, 1996 ; Prensky, 2001), what are their expectations in the school library? How to conceive school libraries so that to help youngsters achieve autonomy in the Information and Communication society ?

This questioning will get some answers through the results of the ground research we have been carrying out for years on teenagers and school librarians. Our research method mixes

practice and imaginary and is based on a contextual approach of the informational activity that considers the practices observed as socially situated and determined by the symbolic dimension of the location as well as of the people using the considered location.

We adopt a qualitative approach of data collection in order to seize in a better way the imaginaries of young people and the “social thickness of the practice in construction”. (Jeanneret, Souchier, Le Marec, 2003). We combine three survey methods : observations, semi-directive interviews, and clarification interviews ; either individual or group interviews. We have observed the behavior in the CDI of French students in high schools (“collèges”, 11 to 14 years old) and colleges (“lycées”, 15 to 18). Our intention was to question their relationships with such a specific location within the educational institution and to check the validity of this widespread claim : “digital natives” have a deeply different relationship with “places of knowledge” (Jacob, 2007), and they reject traditional institutions such as libraries.

Our presentation is intended to pull apart such a scientifically flawed assertion and to give voice to teenagers<sup>1</sup>. It is divided into three parts. In the first part, we will show how the school library can be a real “laboratory for information practices” (Cordier, 2009), which combines formal and non-formal practices. In the second part, we will analyze the students' imaginaries and expectations in the school library and question their relationships with paper or online search tools in the CDI. In the third part, we will show how the school library can be a lever to train school students. Information professionals are indeed truly expected by “digital natives” to provide to them a backup to autonomy in the information society.

### **The school library, a location questioned by the practices of the “digital natives”**

It is a fact that since the Internet has become important in public or private premises such as public libraries, leisure centers, cafés and of course homes, it has fostered the development of non-formal practices. As they are developed outside the school world, these practices nourish and spoil at the same time the practices prescribed by the school institution (Cordier, 2011). Moreover, these non-formal practices which are very often unseen by school are utterly rightful to the individuals for whom they are efficient and appropriate to their needs and everyday activities.

#### *A crossroad for formal and non-formal practices*

That is why we argue in favor of the vision of the CDI as a crossroad designed to stimulate both formal and non-formal practices.

Indeed, during educational sessions, the “Centre de Documentation et d'Information” becomes a place for institutional training where the formality of learning is undeniable. It is different when the place welcomes students with various purposes : searching information, reading, relaxing... In this case, the CDI appears to be a place designed to welcome a diversity of individual and/or group activities. The “professeurs documentalistes” refer to these moments as “document coaching” instead of “document training”.

In a teaching-learning situation, a student's documentation practice is necessarily supervised and compelled. Contrariwise, everything gets possible for the student when in a situation of informal research in the CDI. As no objective or pedagogical method are prescribed by a

---

<sup>1</sup> In order to make them understandable, we have translated into English the words of the teenagers we have interviewed. It is obvious however that a translation will not report the nuances and subtleties of the French language. We apologize for any inconvenience

teacher, the student can manage his “ways and means” (Certeau, 2004) ie he/she is allowed wide latitude to manage his/her activity as he/she wishes. Therefore, each student in a situation of informal research customizes his/her path and activity according to his/her experience and representations, but also according to the uncertainties of the situation and according to his/her mood.

Much can be learnt by academic researchers but also and above all by teachers themselves from observing teenagers' unprompted information practices.

### ***An ecological approach of the learner***

This is indeed our proposal : what if the teacher-librarian takes the chance of the CDI being an observatory of informal practices to develop training practices which would be much fitted to the needs and usual practices of the students ?

As a matter of fact, when working, the students do not appear to us as abstract epistemic subjects with disembodied cleverness ; they are social beings with secret behaviors, as they are confronted with the torments they are trying to understand, to explain and to elucidate, looking for a meaning to their endeavors.

It is indeed inconceivable to set aside informal information practices as they shape the expectations and the behaviors as far as teaching information is concerned. Moreover, as pointed out by Annette Béguin, a French researcher in Information and Communication Sciences, these practices may be “resources” as well as “epistemological and/or didactic obstacles for teachers” (Béguin, 2006). Eventually, taking into account the students' informal research practices and using them as a support to develop our own professional practices, either teaching or management ones, is a way for us to give social sense to the teaching of information literacy.

That is why we take into account in our research the dimensions of imaginary and emotion as they play an important part in the relationship people have with information and in the way they develop information practices.

### **“Digital natives” and school libraries : a couple with a promising future**

Joëlle Le Marec defines libraries as “cultural and training places” and says : “They are much more symbolical and social places than mere technical objects ; they give an explicit structure to practices” (Le Marec, 2006, p. 16). Inspired by this conviction, we focus on the imaginary developed about libraries by the users and the connection between this imaginary -which is partly influenced by the practices of the professionals- and the practices the users develop.

### ***A place rooted in the teenager's emotional and school backgrounds***

The documentation space is what Michel de Certeau refers to as a “deposit of sense”, in other words, the user reads it and interpret it, giving it a meaning and a function in his informational and more widely biographical itinerary.

The school library plays an important part in the life of these school students ; they realized it when they once visited a nearby university library, as shown by this conversation with Caroline and Coraline, 16 :

AC : What do you think of this university library ?

Caroline : It is quiet, too quiet. I don't like it at all

Coraline : I don't like it either. There's no life here.

Caroline : Yes, that's it, no life ! We can't talk aloud, we are almost afraid to breathe. No comparison with the CDI

AC : Why ?

Coraline : Well, in the CDI, we are free to do as we want, we feel there is life there, we can talk, we feel at ease ! The CDI is full of life !

This says it all “we feel at ease! The CDI is full of life”. The teenagers we met have often told us of their feeling free to talk and at ease in the school library.

Aurore, 16, draws a comparison between the school library and the public library and once more, it sounds the death knell : “I feel much at ease in the CDI, honestly, because we can talk as we want, work the way we like, the way we're used to. The CDI is a place much suited to us, to our way of working, while at the public library, it looks like we have to be different from what we are in real life”.

The teenagers we have interviewed need the CDI to study, but it is also seen as a living place where they can “mix study and pleasure” as said by Sabrina, 12. Flavien, 17, will not compare the CDI to what he refers to as a “traditional library” : For me, the CDI is not a traditional library because of course we can work in there, but it is also a place where we can gather and where the teacher-librarian can give us pieces of advice and even discuss with us, sometimes about non-school topics. The CDI is more lively. The library is only to work, it is more serious”.

The way these teenagers read the spatial organization and the signage nourishes this vision of the CDI. Coline, 11, pointed out that the school library is decorated with posters of movies youngsters are interested in. Baptiste, 14, enjoys being allowed to move the tables inside the CDI for a group work ; this is often not allowed in public libraries.

Eventually, if teenagers willingly plebiscite the school library, it is because there is there an information professional responsive to their needs. In the imaginary of the students we have met, there is no CDI without a teacher-librarian and vice versa.

Attending the CDI is the best way for a student to be helped by a teacher qualified in the field of information. “If I have a problem, I know that [the teacher-librarian] is there to help me”, Marion, 11, who often goes to the CDI for her researches, explained. College students enjoys the school library when granted a margin of liberty by the teacher-librarian : “He trusts us”, Justine, 15, pointed out, referring to the way the teacher-librarian manages the place. Flavien, 17, agreed : “it's like home : if you're sensible, then you can do as you please. I do like that, it is the best way of improving”.

Eventually, Kelly, 16, summed it up : “We're really at ease in our CDI, for sure ! With [teacher-librarian] who is there just in case we need help, and we have our working habits here !”

### ***A documentation space with its own informational singularity***

The school library is thus meaningful to teenagers as a living and studying place. But how important is it to them when searching information is concerned ?

The question is worth being asked at a time when public discourses refer to “mutant teenagers” who need no help from anyone to live in the information world.

Mark Prensky, an American consultant is indeed unequivocal : “ It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today's students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors”

(Prensky, 2001). Prensky's thesis is however denounced with no hesitation by quite a lot of academic researchers, such as Sue Bennet who does not beat about the bush : “ He relies on anecdotes, conjecture and speculation. Nonetheless his ideas have often been uncritically repeated and cited as if fact” (Bennet, 2012).

We back such a disagreement. Considering “youngsters” as “digital natives” is a mere smoke-screen that leads to cast an homogeneous glance to teenagers when they use the Internet or digital technologies in general ; it also leads to hastily conclude that the digital environment is a mere substitution of the printed information world. Many students we have met, either in high schools or colleges, declare themselves non expert as far as searching information on the Internet is concerned and even confess being apprehensive when a project they are working on must end up with a digital production. We met for instance Armelle, 17, who claims a need for training to the Internet : “I've got an I-Phone but I'm not an expert though !”

But we have also been able to see that these students, even though exposed to a digital atmosphere, have an almost traditional imaginary when libraries are concerned.

As part of a college university project, some college students had the opportunity of a working session in a university library ; they beat the odds as they were very disappointed by the place being modern. An informal conversation we had outside the university library with Anaïs and Aurore, 16, deserves our attention :

Julie : I was disappointed actually ! I expected a dark place, you see, with large wooden tables, dim lights, and actually, it was different !

Anaïs : Not at all, there were computers, modern furniture like in the CDI; it was very modern all in all [...]

AC : Do you consider working in a library with no computer ?

Anaïs : To be honest, yes... For me, computers don't make a library interesting to me.

Julie : [she interrupts Anaïs] We have computers at home, we don't need to find computers everywhere.

The younger teenagers that we have met reveal the same imaginary through their practices of the “Centre de Documentation et d'Information”. Once they are in the place, they are “diverted” from digital tools. Many of them point out what makes it deeply different between the CDI and other living places : a printed collection they don't have elsewhere.

Melissa, 11, for instance, has an Internet connection at home and is used to resorting outside school to digital tools to search information. It is all different when she is in the CDI : “When at school, I seize the opportunity to benefit from all these books ; they are beautiful, you can't imagine how I like them. There are no books at home, they're so expensive”. Even for Émilie, 11, from an upper-class family, the interest for the printed collection is much higher than it is for digital tools ; this has an influence on her information search methodology when she is in the CDI :

AC : My, is it a documentary book you are using ?

Émilie : yes, it is the CDI here, so I seize the opportunity

AC : What opportunity ?

Émilie : Books. Seeing all these books, I feel like touching them, looking at them !

AC : So are you doing your information search in books at the moment ?

Émilie : yes, I often do that when I'm in the CDI. There are loads of books waiting for me [laughters] so, I use them !

AC : You told me however that you'd rather use the Internet usually.

Émilie : Yes, that's right ! When at home or at one of my friend's, I use the Internet, that's my trick. But it's different here, even if I have books at home, not that much and not about so many topics. So when I'm in the CDI, it's books first !

However, even in the school library, the information activity is undoubtedly influenced by digital and mobile tools. In the CDI, there is no information search activity without resorting to communication tools, whatever their kinds.

That is what happened in this college where the teacher-librarian lets the students use their mobile phones when working in groups, particularly when students belonging to the same group are located in different rooms : some in the CDI, some in the computer room and some others in the classroom). We have been able to observe that self-regulation, especially validating resources, was performed through text messages.

Another mobile tool take an important part, when it is allowed, in teenagers' information activities : the MP3 player. Many teenagers, especially boys, turn it on when they need isolation within their own groups. They enjoy being able to transpose their usual working habits from their bedrooms to the school library, as Mathieu, 17, pointed out : “At home, I always works like that, so when in the CDI, I'm glad I can do it too. It helps me concentrate on my work. I feel like home !”

The school library is thus a place where information and communication practices are utterly multimedia.

### **The school library provides assistance to the « digital natives »**

Is it time then, as Vincent Liquète, Cécile Gardiès and Isabelle Fabre said, to “reconsider document mediation” (Liquète et al., 2010) ?

This implies for us another questioning, and a fertile one : how can the teacher-librarian back on the information space to teach information and documentation in a contextualized and efficient way ?

### ***Mediation through the space : a lever to teach information literacy***

Isabelle Fabre, a researcher in Information and Communication Sciences asserted that “a documentation system contains the ability of providing support” (Fabre, 2009). The space is an integral part of a documentation system. Hence the special attention to be paid to the CDI as a documentation space, as a place for information but also for developing information practices.

To our mind, it is a mediation of sense that can be fostered in the CDI by the teacher-librarian. The aim is to enable students to realize the various potentialities of action which are offered by the space, in other words the information context they are evolving in. This construction of affordances (we mean being aware of the action potentialities a context offers) relies on the way a professional will educate a student's capacity of paying attention. Such a capacity can only develop if a student is encouraged to investigate tools and methods, to be thoughtful of his/her procedures and productions, in other words, to be undertaking.

### ***Implementing adapted learning methods***

A documentation space is considered as a tool for the professionals as it helps them foster their students' autonomy (Fabre, 2009).

Autonomy is the ability of learning by oneself from the context (Liquète, Maury, 2007). Thanks to his/her expertise, the teacher-librarian can take advantage of a context he/she contributes to create to develop information teaching situations that aim the quest for autonomy. Then, planning the space and utilizing it pedagogically and didactically, the teacher-librarian can convert it into an "area of encouraged actions". This area includes "all the activities, objects and places gathered in a space of action with the aim of helping a student enhance his/her potentiality of action, and therefore his/her capacity of action" (Bril, 2002, p. 258).

When evaluating the information potentiality of the context he/she is evolving in, the student is really able to formalize the documentation methodology he/she is setting up. Indeed, the context where practices are developing can be considered as the cognitive extension of the human beings who are part of it. This context is then equivalent to a set of cognitive resources an actor can draw on to perform an action (Proulx, 2000). The collaborative activities allowed in the school library, as they commit students into a collective issue resolution process, encourage them to think upon their own cognitive processes and help them to acquire culture of participation, an necessary skill in the information world. However, it seems essential to us to also think of the space in a virtual dimension (Lamizet, 1998). We do not regard the virtual space as complementary to the real space, but we consider both as a continuum, a complex and boundless information world.

That is why information professionals bear a great responsibility nowadays, as they they are provided with a particularly mighty mediation tool, the school library, to foster their users' emancipation. It is up to them, it is up to all of us collectively to work upon the development of information potential for everyone, that is to say the ability for an individual to enhance his skills, either quantity wise or quality wise (Yoon, 2008). Such a skill is all the more essential for constructing information culture that it stands in a proactive vision of learning and is a key factor in the ability of the individual to adapt to future environments.

## **Conclusion**

As attested by our research, the future looks bright for the school library, and the teenagers we have met agree on that ! The school library is a living place and a meeting place but also an outstanding educational tool to develop a multifaceted, collaborative and emancipatory information culture.

We must not however be mistaken : it is not only a matter of space ! Care must be taken not to restrict mediation to the student's information context. Thinking on spaces to develop information autonomy does not restrict to interior layout, equipment nor usage. Some complex issues are at stake, such as the question of taking into account usual information practices and of course, last but not least, the professional's position in a space where mediation is important.

We are persuaded that the school library -CDI- is a significant factor of "being-in-the-information-world", which is for us a set of attitudes, values, imaginaries and practices associated with attendance to information environments.

## **References**

Barlow, John (1996). Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. *July 30, 2011*.  
Retrieved form : <https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>

- Béguin-Verbrugge, Annette (2006). *Pourquoi faut-il étudier les pratiques informelles des apprenants en matière d'information et de documentation ?*. Communication au colloque CIVIIC « Histoire et savoirs », Rouen, mai 2006.
- Bennett, Sue (2012). Digital natives. In YAN, Z. (Eds). *Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior*. United States : IGI Global, vol.1, 212-219. Retrieved from : <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2364&context=edupapers>
- Bril, Blandine (2002). Apprentissage et contexte. *Intellectica*, 35, 251-268.
- Certeau, Michel de (2004). *L'invention du quotidien. 1 : Arts de faire*. Paris : Gallimard.
- Cordier, Anne (2009). Le CDI : un laboratoire à la croisée des mondes. *Médiadoc*, 3, 6-10.
- Cordier, Anne (2011). Imaginaires, représentations, pratiques formelles et non formelles de la recherche d'information sur Internet : Le cas d'élèves de 6<sup>ème</sup> et de professeurs documentalistes. *Thèse de Doctorat en Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication, sous la direction de Éric Delamotte et Vincent Liquète, Lille 3*. Retrieved from : [http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/73/76/37/PDF/THESE\\_Volume\\_1.pdf](http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/73/76/37/PDF/THESE_Volume_1.pdf)
- Fabre, Isabelle (2009). Capacité du dispositif documentaire à révéler son rôle d'accompagnement. *Esquisse*, 52, 127-139. Retrieved from : <http://oatao.univ-toulouse.fr/1941/>
- Jacob, Christian (dir.) (2007). *Lieux de savoir : espaces et communautés*. Paris : Albin Michel.
- Jeanneret, Yves, Souchier, Emmanuel, Le Marec, Joëlle (2003). *Lire, écrire, récrire : objets, signes et pratiques des médias informatisés*. Paris : BPI.
- Le Marec, Joëlle (2006). Les musées et bibliothèques comme espaces culturels de formation. *Savoirs*, 2006/2, 11, 09-38.
- Liquete, Vincent, Fabre, Isabelle, Gardies, Cécile. Faut-il repenser la médiation documentaire ? *Les Enjeux de l'Information et de la Communication*, 43-57.
- Liquete, Vincent, Maury, Yolande (2007). *Le travail autonome : comment aider les élèves à l'acquisition de l'autonomie*. Paris : Armand Colin.
- Prensky, Marc (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9 (5), 01-06.
- Proulx, Serge (2000). La construction sociale des objets informationnels : matériaux pour une ethnographie des usages. *Réseaux, Savoirs et Territoires*. Retrieved from : <http://barthes.ens.fr/atelier/articles/proulx2000.html>
- Yoon, C.G. (2008). A structural model of end-user computing competency and user performance. *Knowledge-Based Systems*, 21.



**Biographical note**

Anne Cordier is a former teacher-librarian. She has a PhD in Information and Communication Science. She is now an Associate professor (maître de conférences) at Rouen University. She is very involved in the training of teacher-librarians. She is also involved into several research projects among which is "Translit". Her personal research focuses on imaginaries of information and informational practices, and a reflection about places of information. Her most recent contributions was in the European Conference on Information Literacy 2014 in Dubrovnik (Croatia) with Anne Lehmanns about "Transliteracy and knowledge formats". She's one of the authors of *Culture of Information* a book recently published by Vincent Liquète (CNRS, Essentiels Hermès, 2014).