

# “I didn’t realize that I needed books that often”: Demonstrating library value during the temporary closure of an academic branch library

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Demonstrating academic library value is crucial in this era of budget cuts and freely available online resources. This article provides a unique complement to existing research on library value. The author uses a qualitative approach known as narrative inquiry to evaluate patron experiences during the temporary closure of an academic branch library. The findings suggest that losing the branch library greatly disrupted students’ routines and compromised their scholarly effectiveness. The loss of branch library services allowed patrons to recognize the importance of their library, thereby providing compelling support for the value of libraries.

## Introduction

Spurred by tight academic budgets and doubts about library relevancy in the age of the internet, demonstrating academic library value has become a core concern. The author uses a form of qualitative research known as narrative inquiry to view the temporary closure of an academic branch library from the viewpoint of students who used that space prior to its closure and thus provides a compelling argument for the value of the branch library. In narrative inquiry, the researcher places value on the knowledge that each person holds and which is transferred via interviews or storytelling.

A branch library at a large university advertised a temporary closure due to renovation during the Fall 2017 semester. The building remained closed during the following Spring and Summer semesters. Twelve students, both undergraduate and graduate, participated in one-on-one interviews consisting of a series of semi-structured questions about their experiences, feelings, and attitudes related to the library closure.

## Overview

While literature exists on the impact of a permanent academic library closure (Murray, 2014; Lange, Lannon, & McKinnon, 2014; Hayden, 2011, and Albanese, 2007) little to no research exists on how a temporary closure of an academic branch library impacts the student experience. This study uses the library’s temporary closure to fill a gap in the literature. Using this approach, the paper provides clear evidence of library value.

As mentioned, a branch library at a large research university in the southeastern United States closed temporarily for a major renovation. The closure of this

library began immediately after final exams in December 2017 with an anticipated reopening date in August 2018. During this time, the library was completely closed to the public. The library’s faculty and staff were relocated to other campus libraries and the majority of the general collection was inaccessible. Only Course reserves and current journals were available for use at the main campus library. The branch library, known as the Education Library, saw over 123,000 visitors during the 2016-2017 academic year. The Education Library is open to all students on campus, however, it primarily serves students and faculty of the College of Education (COE) which is approximately a 15-minute walk to other libraries on campus. The latest estimates provided by the COE indicate that total enrollment for all course sections is 4,231 total undergraduate and graduate students with 100 full-time faculty members and 98 additional staff members (<https://education.ufl.edu/facts/>, 2018). The Education Library is physically set apart from the rest of campus by a busy road but is in close proximity to sororities and student apartments.

At the beginning of the Fall semester before the renovation, the author and other staff members of the Education Library created and maintained a renovation LibGuide to help answer questions about the renovation process and provide updates and photos once the renovation began. In addition, posters were made and placed around the COE directing patrons to the LibGuide and links to the LibGuide were sent monthly via the Education Library’s Facebook and Twitter accounts, as well as through Listservs that reached all faculty, staff, and students of the COE. Announcements were made in two locations within the COE on communication monitors. The author was interested in learning about the experiences during the renovation period of students who had regularly visited the Education Library prior to renovation.

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The author hypothesized that the temporary closure of the Education Library would have a negative impact on the scholarly efforts of students due to the lack of access to print materials and the distance from the main campus. In addition, the author hypothesized that students would report that the LibGuides are an important resource for information on the renovation.

Aug. - Dec. 2017	Announcements made through COE listservs, library and COE websites, library and COE social media, and posters around the COE about the upcoming renovation and library closure
Dec. 17, 2017	Education Library closed to the public
Jan. 2018	Education Library Course Reserves and Journals available for check-out from main campus library
March - April 2018	Participant interviews

## Literature Review

Most studies on library renovations and library closures tend to discuss permanent library closures as opposed to temporary closures as well as various approaches to measure library value. Three themes in the literature that are addressed here are: the use of narrative inquiry in library literature, the common themes seen in the literature about library renovations, and the literature surrounding the value of academic libraries.

### *Narrative Inquiry*

Narrative inquiry is a type of basic qualitative research that asks participants to explain how they felt and what they were thinking during a particular phenomenon, in this case during a library closure. Narrative inquiry is often conducted through interviews with participants who experienced a particular phenomenon but can also include the analysis of artifacts from the phenomenon such as diaries and photographs. By utilizing the narrative inquiry approach, researchers can understand the individual's understanding of a phenomenon but may also be able to infer meaning to the culture of the individual as well. Very few articles in library literature take advantage of narrative inquiry to study library-related phenomenon.

Most of the articles in library literature use the narrative inquiry approach to understand the perspective of librarians and library students. Bugg (2015) used narrative

inquiry to examine the retention and advancement of minority academic librarians working as middle managers while Frye (2018) utilized a modified narrative inquiry approach to explore the experiences of new school librarians. Mattern, Jeng, He, Lyon, & Brenner (2015) used a visual narrative inquiry approach to study the visual conceptualization of the research process among those early in their careers. Clark (2014) used a narrative inquiry approach to better understand the search process of two mature students over the course of a semester. Farmer (2004) used narrative inquiry to assess the student experience in a library media management course. However, searches of Library Literature & Information Full Text and Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts found no articles that specifically use a narrative inquiry research method to investigate patron feedback on the library itself.

### *Library Closures*

While articles discussing the planning and implementation of library renovations are plentiful, relatively few directly explore how the renovations impact patrons. Common themes in these articles include: the library's approach to renovation, student perceptions after a renovation, and library usage.

In a news article in *Library Journal*, Andrew Albanese discusses the three-year renovation and closure of the main library at Ohio State University (Albanese, 2007). This complex renovation involved moving library materials to four different locations on campus and providing a free bus service to other locations as well as free scanning, electronic delivery, and document delivery. Albanese informally interviewed two students who were studying at one of the temporary locations who briefly spoke of the frustration and confusion of the multifaceted project, including the disappointment that they would not be there when the renovation was complete. Linda Teel conducted patron interviews as part of an assessment to renovate the Curriculum Materials Center at East Carolina University (Teel, 2017). These interviews consisted of open-ended structured questions that were video recorded to gather opinions on the completed renovation changes. In addition to patron interviews, the study included surveys, LibQUAL+® results, and the collection of statistical data.

In an effort to study how students use physical spaces in the library, Manley and Garczynski examined how the closure of a coffee shop for renovation within the library affected usage (Manley & Garczynski, 2018). They found that having the coffee shop open increased usage by 10%. None of these studies however, examines the impact of a library closure from the viewpoint of the student experience using a qualitative approach.

## *Library Value*

Literature on determining the value of academic libraries is more common. The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Value of Academic Libraries Report* states that academic librarians should use assessment methods such as interviews and focus groups that allow them to represent the user experience (ACRL, 2010). The report also states that academic librarians should apply new assessment methods to complement existing approaches, by utilizing the narrative inquiry approach this article does that.

An analysis by Schwieder and Hinchliffe (2018) shows that the structure of literature on academic library value tends to fall into several basic categories including small group studies, single institution studies, and multi-institution studies. This study falls into the single institution category which focuses on understanding the user group at a single institution and in this case a single branch library of an institution.

The literature provides some documentation of how permanent library closures impact students but no studies have been conducted on how a temporary closure affects the student experience. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing a narrative inquiry approach to understanding the student experience during the temporary closure of a branch library. It also encourages the use of narrative inquiry as a method of research for the field of librarianship as this method is not often used in the library literature but has the opportunity to help researchers better understand the experience of the library user.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative research methodology known as narrative inquiry is used to better understand the experiences, thoughts, behaviors, and feelings of patrons of the Education Library during the closure. The use of narrative inquiry is important when collecting first-hand information from individuals involved with a particular event, in this case the closure of a branch library. The first step the researcher must take before collecting data is to establish the research question and identify the purpose of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data in narrative inquiry are the stories of participants. The primary method of data collection is through conducting interviews with participants who have experienced the particular phenomenon of interest to the researcher.

The author gathered information through one-on-one interviews with 12 students who used the library prior to its renovation. Ten interviews were conducted in-person at the author's office in the main library while 2 interviews

were conducted using the video conferencing service Zoom. The interviews were recorded in March and April 2018 during the library closure and were later transcribed and coded by the author.

## *Participants*

Students were recruited to participate in the study through an email listserv targeting students within the COE, through social media, and by word-of-mouth. Each participant was asked at the start of the interview how frequently they visited the Education Library prior to closure with responses ranging from a few times a month to almost daily. The recruitment advertised that the interview would take no more than 60 minutes and that upon completion they would receive a \$10 Starbucks gift certificate provided by the researcher.

Participants included 12 students: 6 undergraduates and 6 graduate students. Eleven participants were education majors and one was a non-education major who lived in close proximity to the branch library. All participants are identified using pseudonyms as seen in Table 2. The primary method of analyzing narrative inquiry data is through a process called thematic coding. After the researcher gathered the various stories related to the topic of interest, the data was organized into themes in order to add meaning and insight. Coding was conducted manually by the researcher by creating a codebook using an Excel spreadsheet to analyze participant data collected from the 12 interviews. Using this method, the researcher organized the spreadsheet into columns that provided a summary of the data and relationships between the various data points.

When coding data in narrative inquiry, the researcher often creates columns to identify broad categories, the relationships between them, and labels them in ways that will help guide them in analyzing the data as it relates to the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, in this study, many participants who mentioned the lighting would be labeled as "lighting," a participant who mentioned the comfort of the furniture would be labeled as "furniture." However, these would both be labeled more broadly as "ambience." The transcripts were thoroughly examined by the researcher to discover the categories and relationships between them for analysis purposes.

## **Findings**

All the students interviewed for this study reported being inconvenienced in some way by the renovation. The most cited inconveniences were having to request materials through interlibrary loan and not having access to the stacks; not having access to technology such as printers and scanners; impact of the closure on academic coursework;

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having to travel further to get to another study location; and not having a convenient place to just hang out in between classes. For the purposes of this paper the author has categorized each of these under the following themes: access to materials, access to technology, productive study environment, and location and place.

*Access to Materials*

Prior to the renovation, the Education Library weeded its collection heavily, sending many books to an off-site storage facility; these books were available for delivery through the library catalog. Due to the size of the remaining collection, the rest of the materials were stored at a warehouse outside of town and were unavailable to students. The course reserves and current journals were both smaller collections that were able to be housed within the main library. Every effort was made through the LibGuide, signage throughout the COE, and email announcements to make students and faculty aware of the upcoming limited access to materials during the renovation. Several students mentioned the inconvenience of not having ready access to books from the Education Library. They described having to either go to the main library to get their course reserves or having to request

interlibrary loan items. In some cases, they purchased textbooks they normally would have checked out of the library because they did not know that the course reserves had been moved to the main library. Alice, a doctoral student studying English as a Second Language, stated:

I can't get the books I need sooner and so some of the books I needed right ahead I just had to give up... [I]f it was at the Education Library I'd just like get it today but I have to request Interlibrary Loan and then it takes a week to get it and so that's been a big delay. I don't get to read the book when I have the feeling like I need it right now.

In addition, Alice explained the inconvenience of "traveling back and forth" to get course reserves. She said, "If it was at the Education Library it would have been so much easier. Just go down there and read the book or just make a quick scan. This semester was a little bit tough in that way." She also stated:

I guess I didn't realize that I needed books that often. When the Education Library was there, I guess I just usually go on my way. Um, like, this semester I think at least five books or more were located at the Education

<b>Name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Year in school</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Frequency of visits to the Education Library</b>
Alice	Doctoral	ESOL	A few times a month
Beatrice	Doctoral	Curriculum and Instruction	A few times a week
Charlotte	Doctoral	Higher Education Administration	Almost on a daily basis
Diana	Masters	Special Education	Once or twice a week
Elizabeth	Masters	Counselor Education	Once or twice a week
Frances	Masters	Elementary Education	Two or three times a month
Grace	Senior	Elementary Education	A few times a week
Helen	Senior	Elementary Education	A few times a week
Jane	Junior	Elementary Education	Two to three times a week
Kate	Junior	Economics	Every single day
Louise	Junior	Elementary Education and Psychology	Several times a week
Mary	Sophomore	Elementary Education	Almost on a daily basis

Library that I have no longer access to get to them, so I had to go through Interlibrary Loan which takes longer and I have to walk all the way to [the main library] and return it.

Beatrice stated that she finds it easier to use Amazon and buy the books she needs now. She said she even had an argument with her husband about it. "My husband's yelling at me because I keep buying books. He's like why do you keep buying books for? And I'm like, "But I don't have these! I need these!"

Charlotte, a Doctoral student studying Higher Education Administration, explained that the main reason she used to frequent the Education Library was to check out print books. She said "The fact that I can interlibrary loan is helpful, but again, it's more inconvenient than it is helpful" because you have to wait for the item to arrive and you do not get the item when you need it. Frances, a master's student in the Elementary Education program, stated that she did not know that the course reserves were available at the main campus library and that she bought her textbooks, unlike in previous semesters, or came up with other unique ways to access her course materials. She stated that she relies "on online [copies] or if a friend has it, have them like send me pictures or something." After being told that course reserves were still available at the main library, she stated that she probably still would not have had time to go to that library to check them out because of the distance and her busy schedule.

Louise stated that she previously checked out course reserves from the Education Library in the past but this semester it has been "stressful" due to the distance of having to walk to the main library to get them. So, she said "this semester I kind of had to share textbooks with friends or look for a little bit cheaper cause textbooks can be really expensive."

In hindsight, the Education Library could have provided a book return somewhere within the COE that could be checked daily to make it easier on students needing to return items such as Course Reserves and other materials. This could have even been an informal system of a mail bin in the COE's main office that could be picked up by courier and returned to the main library. While students would still have had to walk to the main library to pick up materials, this would perhaps decrease their need to walk to the main library by half.

While the library did purchase more electronic books during the renovation this obviously cannot make up for the fact that the majority of the print collection was unavailable. Because this was a temporary closure, the library did not explore other online approaches. Instead,

choosing to utilize interlibrary loan for those materials that were unavailable for the duration of the renovation.

### *Access to Technology*

The Education Library provides technology including public computers, printing, scanning, iPads for checkout, an ADA adaptive/assistive computer workstation, and 3D printing. While COE faculty and staff had access to computers, printers, and scanners in their offices, students had no other place in close proximity to use these basic technologies.

A few students gave responses indicating that it has been inconvenient to not have close access to technology such as a printer and/or scanner. Most students said that they now go to the Student Union to print because they offer free printing even though it is located on the opposite side of campus.

Charlotte a grad student who also teaches a class, reported that she changed one of her course assignments due to the lack of a nearby printer: "I usually give them a weekly reflection assignment and I usually ask them to turn it in hard copy and a lot of students are having trouble printing them because the library's closed. So, I had to end up changing my assignment in a different way so they would just turn in through Canvas. And then I will just print them out myself. Because I didn't want them to be so inconvenienced by the renovation too."

Diana, a master's student studying Special Education, stated that in the past she had not needed the library's scanner but this semester she could have used it quite a bit saying, "I miss the scanner because now I need it more but I can't do it." She continued that being an intern teacher requires "A lot of signed forms...so I need to scan" but her school does not have a scanner she can use.

Elizabeth is currently working at a local school for her degree program. She comes to campus sometimes after school lets out and is disappointed that there is not a place to print or scan. She said, "mainly the two things I go to the library for is for printing or scanning." When asked what she has found most unhelpful with the library being closed she replied, "I think the fact that if I *did* have extra time between my class and my internship but I can't go there just to print something."

Kate stated that she does not have easy access to printing since the Education Library has been closed. She lamented, "Not having the printing I would have to say has been the biggest pain in the butt." She said that before the renovation she would usually come to the library in the morning before class to print out her assignments that were due that day and now, she has to travel farther to print her assignments.

One change we could have made to address the lack of technology would be to coordinate with the COE to provide a printer and scanner somewhere within the COE for students to use during the renovation. Due to the limited space issues previously mentioned this would have been difficult but librarians involved in similar projects in the future may want to consider this in their planning. As most students bring laptops with them to campus, the computers are not as big of a barrier for most students. The 3D printer, ADA technology, and iPads saw low use in the past and other libraries on campus offer these for those who might need them. However, leaving the printers and scanners at the COE would have been useful to the students.

### *Study Habits*

The Education Library is often described as the quiet library on campus, a place where studying can take place without distractions. Many students in the interview described the Education Library as a place where only quiet whispers and keyboard typing can be heard as a desirable feature of the space. Mary, a sophomore Elementary Education major, stated that the Education Library provides a place that is "way quieter and I can focus more attention on my work and my research."

Alice explained that she and her friends do not get as much studying done as before the renovation because they must travel to another library, stating, "We know we could get more studying done if we were able to just right after class go to a library that's near us." Helen, a senior Elementary Education major, stated that the Education Library closure has "definitely taken a toll on like, my studying habits." She says that because the other libraries on campus are further away "it takes a lot for me to get up and go." She said she tried going to other libraries on campus but that "it gets a lot more difficult to find a space and time when you're not going to be like, constantly distracted."

Jane, a junior studying Elementary Education, described her current study situation as "limited." She said that she now prefers to study at home but that there are a lot of distractions at home that keep her from studying as well as she did in the Education Library. She said that she lives in her sorority house, and describes the situation as "kind of loud and I work better in like, quiet areas."

While not much could have been done to provide a quiet place at the COE due to the overlapping renovation projects, it is valuable to know that students think of the Education Library as a place that is beneficial, even crucial to their academic success and reaffirms the need for the Education Library as a resource within the COE.

### *Location and Place*

The Education Library is physically separated from the main campus by a busy road, however many students live nearby with sororities and in other student housing. Walking from the COE to other points on campus such as the main library, the science library, and the student center takes at least 15 minutes. Not surprisingly, many students cited the inconvenience of finding and getting to other study locations on campus as the most inconvenient part of the renovation. Some indicated that the time required to get to another library or study location reduces the time they have to study. Prior to the renovation, these students reported they would simply walk to the Education Library from other parts of the COE after class to study or from the sorority house or student housing within close proximity.

Grace, a senior Elementary Education major stated, "It's a hassle to go elsewhere." She now goes to the Music building to study alone and to the main library to study with a group. Jane, a junior Elementary Education major, stated that she misses having a library in close proximity to her classes. She said, "Just having that accessibility and having it really close to campus where I was actually, it was nice."

Kate, a junior Economics major, said that she chose to study at the Education Library even though she is not an Education major, due to the close proximity of the library to her residence. She said that before the renovation, the Education Library "was right there and there's no excuse not to go when it's right there." Now she says:

It's definitely, like, harder...for instance, like, I wanted to go to [the main library] last night but it was so cold I didn't want to scoot there. So, I was like, uh, I guess I'm not going. It was so cold I didn't want to leave. Or like, walking at night like all the way to [the science library] or all the way to [the main library] just wasn't in the picture for me. Like, it wasn't an option so it's definitely more difficult especially since I live in my sorority house.

Elizabeth, a master's student studying Counselor Education explained that she has class from 8:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. in the COE "and then we have to wait until 2:00 p.m. to have our next class. It is a long day for us. So, it would be really helpful if Education Library is open so we can just go there and work. And now we have to walk to the [innovation building]" which she said takes about fifteen minutes.

Beatrice, a doctoral student studying Curriculum and Instruction, reported that she finds it easier to drive to a local restaurant than to walk to other study locations on campus which reduces her study time. She said she found a

restaurant where she could get a bite to eat, plug in her electronic devices, and enjoy a quiet atmosphere.

Due to the fact that the library needed to be completely closed to complete the renovation, there was no other physical location to provide to students in close proximity to the COE. In addition, the COE was preparing for its own renovation during this time further limiting physical space availability. To the extent possible, libraries experiencing similar situations could collaborate with stakeholders to identify options to provide students temporary limited services in close proximity.

As previously mentioned in addition to the Education Library being closed for renovation, many other parts of the COE were in various states of preparing for its own renovation which limited places for students to just sit in between classes. As also mentioned earlier, the COE is physically separated from the main campus which adds another layer of difficulty in providing a close place for students.

Charlotte, also an instructor for an undergraduate course, commented, "A lot of undergrads are really out of space. Like, they have no place to hang!" Her classroom was located directly below the library but had to move for three weeks due to the noise of jackhammering. The class moved to the graduate student breakroom which can only hold a few people. After class, she said, the students asked her if they could stay in there "Because there's nowhere else to go." She further explained "I mean, they lost their space to just sit down and do work or whatever they need to do...and so, like, they don't have a lot of options anymore. I can see that it's becoming inconvenient to the undergrads."

Frances stated that she has tried going to several different places on campus to study this semester. She commented that while the other locations were nice and comfortable enough, "I just don't know that's my place to go." When asked to clarify she replied, "It's like, those are not our people, from the College of Education." Indicating a preference to be around other students studying education at the Education Library made a difference in her sense of belonging.

Due to the extenuating circumstances of various construction projects at the COE, not much could have been done to provide a space for students. The interviews revealed that students whose classes are primarily in the COE do not have a sense of other campus buildings that are available. We could have provided more information on the renovation LibGuide that directed students to other options such as the main library, the science library or the student center, for example. In addition, we could have provided a list of the basic amenities available at each location such as group study rooms, printers, and scanners.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The results show that students did express a feeling that having the Education Library closed limited their ability to find quiet and close spaces to study. Students also expressed that it took them longer to get to other places to study which reduced their study time. No students mentioned using the renovation LibGuides or any related terms to indicate that that resource had been helpful to them during the renovation.

The author's hypothesis that the closure would have a negative impact on the scholarly efforts of students was correct. Several students stated that the time it took to walk to another location to study or checkout materials or the time it took to receive interlibrary loans did impact the amount of work they were able to accomplish.

The author's hypothesis that students would report that the LibGuides were an important resource for them for information was incorrect. None of the 12 students interviewed mentioned the LibGuides or the Education Library website as a resource that they used. However, while no students mentioned the renovation LibGuides, the statistics of that LibGuide show that it is by far the most frequently visited Education LibGuide with over 3,000 views. In comparison, the next most frequently visited Education LibGuide had almost 600 views during the same time period. Overall, while the students expressed that the renovation period presented an inconvenience, they seem to understand that it is only a temporary inconvenience that will yield long-term benefits. Students indicated that they were excited to see and use the renovated library space and were more appreciative of the fact that they have a convenient subject specific library and librarians at their fingertips.

The following are recommendations for future librarians involved in similar renovation projects in the future. Provide a temporary location near the library that has technology and study space. Explore every opportunity to store materials on campus. Collaborate with stakeholders to identify options to provide students temporary limited services in close proximity such as a book drop, printer, and scanner. Provide information in a LibGuide, email, posters or other means directing students to other study locations on campus, include a list of available amenities.

## Limitations and Recommendations

One limitation of this study is that all of the students who participated were female. However, the male-to-female ratio of students with the COE is very disproportionate. The gender distribution within the COE during the Fall 2017 semester was 1,158 female students to 225 male students. Future researchers may want to reach out

specifically to and gather feedback from the male population as well to determine any gender differences that may be present. In order to fully understand the experiences of students during a particular phenomenon such as a library closure, it would be helpful to have representatives from all student populations.

Another limitation is that the researcher is the sole source of analysis of the transcripts. Future researchers may want to consider asking peers and colleagues to review the transcripts as well. This would improve the rigor and trustworthiness of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Future studies may also want to complement the interview portion of narrative inquiry to include artifacts such as diaries, photos, and field notes. Interviews certainly tell a majority of the story and help researchers understand the participants view, but adding other forms of narrative can lead to even greater understanding of the experience.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to express her sincere thanks to all of the participants who contributed their time and thoughts to this project by participating in one-on-one interviews. The author would also like to recognize the support of Dr. Cliff Haynes and Dr. Laura Spears for their guidance in understanding qualitative research methods.

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## APPENDIX A. Interview Questions

1. What is your major and year in school?
2. I'd like you to tell me about how often you visited the Education Library before the renovation began.
3. I want you to picture yourself walking into the Education Library before the renovation.
4. Describe for me the first thing you see.
5. Describe for me what else you see.
6. Describe for me what you hear.
7. Describe for me anything else that you experienced at the Education Library.
8. I want you to think back to a typical visit to the Education Library. I'd like you to walk me through the activities that you would take while there in as much detail as possible.
9. Now, thinking back on those activities that you described, tell me what it is like to do those activities with the library being closed?
10. Please describe for me anything that has been helpful for you during the renovation.
11. Please describe for me anything that has been unhelpful during the renovation.
12. Now, I'd like you to picture yourself walking into the Education Library after the renovation is over. I'd like for you to describe to me in as much detail as possible what you hope to see.
13. How would you describe the Education Library in one word?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add before we end?