

Diminished gatekeeper role

We have all heard the question “are librarians needed?” repeated occasionally in both the professional and the popular literature, particularly as the internet has grown ubiquitous. The question is not always rhetorical, I fear, even in library literature. On numerous instances, we have seen reductions in work force and the shifting of personnel as the view of the role of librarians has changed.

I would begin by saying that librarians must constantly observe the changing patterns in the communities served. These include economic, organizational and demographic, for these all have profound effects upon our user behavior. We have to spot budding trends within the cultures that affect us. We need both foresight and quick turn-around. In fact, in the best of all worlds we are an integral part of the changes. Therefore, we have to monitor our environment systematically, having in place appropriate strategic frameworks that will alert us to these changes as soon as they are evident, and I will speak of these shortly.

Within our field, there is little disagreement that a paradigm shift is taking place in the information world. Consider this paradigm a lens through which we can observe the culture in which we exist. For our purposes today-since I need only be a facilitator- let us call this paradigm shift the “democratization of information.”

This democratization of information has caused some misconceptions or myths, to crop up within our society. For example, there is the belief among users that they can easily access all information as long as they are in front of a computer with web access. Monica has stated already some of the problems inherent in such a view.

Another myth or a part of the misconception around this democratization of information – a very visible one - is the obsession with keyword searching. Librarians understand the power of the

keyword search, but there are no standards on the web and that is potentially problematic. I did not want to mention them specifically, but Google, and their ilk, are giving users the impression of easy and universal access. I might claim that the users are doomed if they do not disabuse themselves of this assumption. For example, the keywords of today will not work a few years from now and much, perhaps useful and important, information will be lost. We have to be extremely assertive in convincing educated people that successful systems not only exist and can be developed, but that librarians are logical participants in organizing such systems. Imbedding ourselves in the curriculum can facilitate in this effort. Assignment participation can help immensely. As anyone knows, librarians can collaborate in the development and progression of an assignment in such a way that both the student and the faculty will be more successfully integrated in the research process.

Whether these are mere misconceptions or myths, they nonetheless raise the bar for academic librarians. As stated above, librarians must react to the changing patterns within their communities. As historic leaders within the world of information, we cannot sit in the stands and watch. We must be both players and coaches, depending upon our roles within the library. We must set the priorities on the agenda. The democratization of information has had a leveling effect upon academic libraries; roles have changed and good managers have reacted to allow these changes to help them cope. Librarians at successful institutions are relentlessly evaluating what they do and thereby create a workplace wherein they can react to any new changes.

These myths and changes are forcing librarians to move up the food chain. We all know librarians can no longer sit back and take their budget and order books and periodicals. By no means do I wish to imply that this is a passive activity, nor that this is all we have done in the past. However, the democratization of is forcing information literacy to become more of a

commodity that students are required to have and it must be a part of measurable goals and outcomes on numerous levels. This is not self-evident to the students, nor are the methods revealing themselves immediately to the faculty. Librarians have to adjust traditional roles to fit the changes in higher education and the amount of information available about their communities and the methods with which to acquire the data.

We have to become more and more imbedded in the new system, just as we were imbedded in the one previous.

In academic libraries, this means becoming a part of the course, and in fact, a part of the department and college or program. However, for now I would like to emphasize the course level. This way, we are imbedding librarians and becoming an integral part of the course, in description and practice. This is not a new concept; we have all had classroom collaborators who feels the librarians are a necessary part of the research process. We all have had experiences where the faculty member consults us while designing the assignment and we have had a hand in delivery as well. We need to be a part of the curriculum.

Failure will happen, but I would posit that those professors who do not integrate information literacy in their courses are destined to fail should they truly try to measure the learning that is not taking place. As mentioned, new roles mean new organizations and that can be painful to people.

.As also previously noted, librarians must have in place systematic monitoring connected closely with facile planning frameworks. This raises the stakes regarding assessment. Detailed and scientific assessment of student information competencies or literacy is not a luxury and the needs to find, accept, and make known new areas for assessment are greater than ever. This dovetails with the desires of Middle States, and this is compatible with the needs of college

administrators as well. However, librarians cannot just assess those classes we happen to have contact with via the faculty with whom we have relationships already. Librarians have to look at all assignments and not only help measure the learning that is taking place but to analyze the assignment in order to see ways the library's assets can help.

This assessment must go beyond the quick questions at the end of a session when a class comes to the library. For example, librarians must be able to offer the professor and the students, integrated, doubtless electronic, means by which the students can begin to define their place within the research process. For example, intelligent agents can do this as we see in a rather crude form on *Amazon.com*, when one is told what other books might be of interest based upon our searches and purchases. The meta-tags for similar efforts in academic settings already exist because that is what librarians do, as mentioned by Monica. We need to help students understand where in the research process they are. We can do this within CMS programs like *Blackboard*, which already exist. In the face of student uncertainty and faculty skepticism, librarians can collaborate and define as the research component is realized. The assessment components must be not only strong but also adaptable. For example, librarians must work closely with reading and writing centers in producing civilized students.

I hope to have demonstrated that there are many pieces of this effort are already in place and that they may appear at first blush to be disparate, but that the interface or glue is not there yet. The academic librarian must play this role. With the aforementioned raising of the bar, however there is not a given set of skills for doing what librarians will have to do.

This academic library is a dynamic environment and we cannot predict with certainty what directions we are going. However, we can do a great deal to steer things in the directions that we

see as providing more potential for users but does not allow the lowest common denominator to control the direction.

For example, librarians do lead and must continue to lead in integrating proprietary resources. As a part of our myth busting, we have to focus on uses of the proprietary aspects of scholarship and the need for the students to learn how important egress into that arena will make for their success as citizens. Many do not see this as an evolutionary aspect of information. The world of proprietary resources will change and we need to be an integral part of the changes in the future as we have been in the past.

The current developments around XML are a good example of this sort of tool.

I should mention a few of the tools at our disposal: Blogging, RSS, news aggregators, podcasts, SMS, screencasts, vlogs. Social book marking, folksonomies, tagging, personalization, Web, semantic web, institutional repositories, open source, vertical search, just to name a few of the tools at our disposal.

At a fascinating METRO workshop last week on podcasting, it was interesting, thrilling, but a bit disheartening, to hear a roomful of librarians from numerous sorts of libraries in New York casting about for uses of this technology. We are still feeling our way in these areas; jumping from one to the other and not sure, what is next; in fact, someone mentioned vcasting at the meeting.

Many fields are ready for this. For example, History departments are ripe for the kind of imbedded librarians of which I speak. Not only is this field study full of resources that we can suggest and use for assignments, the field is traditionally text dependant so that it is ripe for paranoia. A former colleague of ours attended the American Historical Association's meetings in Philadelphia and felt this was definitely a fecund area for librarians. In the area of research, we

are only just now seeing where we can go with various tools in training students in History. In the medical fields, they are using GIS to define populations; certainly, we can adapt aspects of this effort even in the liberal arts.

We are taking the correct actions as a group, for example on a CUNY – wide effort we have a key element in place, namely the cooperative effort called, LILAC and that group is looking into what Middle States can do for us and what we can do with their efforts to rein in the arms race in collection development and discuss information literacy.

In conclusion, I would say: We know what our content is –others do not; We know what our staffing needs are and have people in place who are able to adjust to change; We are familiar with our physical spaces; We are working in our virtual spaces which are very dynamic and we are dealing with that.

I believe we will often find our roles take an interesting tangent from the traditional roles.

As Joe Janes pointed out recently, the book and the view of that kind of information is changing but no one is leaping to predict where because the technology is close but not there yet.

What is next? We have to be ready to turn on a dime.