

Beth Evans, LACUNY Dialogues, January 19, 2007

Over the years of watching my children make their way through grade school, I have often taken comfort in seeing that regardless of how much their academic struggles were quantified on one side of their tri-annual reports as “not-quite-there-yet” letter grades of “N,” needs improvement, or “S.,” satisfactory, the flip side of their report cards, where characteristics such as “is attentive,” “shows respect,” and “works or plays well with others” have always shown high scores. Since these were my children, and any successes they had were what I would get in line to celebrate, I considered the division of grades as I saw it many times and began to think that perhaps these successes of character were really more valuable as markers of how well my children would do in life than were their grades in multiplying, spelling and coloring within the lines.

To be able to “work or play well with others” are characteristics no less necessary in any four year old pre-schooler than they are in any forty, or thirty or twenty year old adult who works in an environment where cooperation and collaboration are critical to the success of the organization. Libraries, and in particular, academic libraries, are organizations that could never achieve their goals were it not for the efforts of many individuals working towards a common end, delivering information to all those who need it. And although at times we as librarians find our tasks position us like solitary watchmen, manning a lone station single-handedly, answering an individual’s single reference question, cataloguing a single book, we all know that no matter what our individual task is at a given time, we could not be brought to the point where we carry out our task, were it not for the work of others in our institutions, each singly performing his

Beth Evans, LACUNY Dialogues, January 19, 2007

or her own different job. So even when “works well with others” is not as apparent as it is on those occasions, familiar to us all, when we come together as a committee and brainstorm through our latest challenge, we are always, and have always, needed to work well with others in the work we do as librarians.

We know who “we” are and we surely all know what “works” is, but who, in fact, are the others that we work with?

As Daisy and Steven and I prepared for our talk today, musing over the nature of our jobs as librarians, we concluded that yes, indeed, the nature of our jobs seems to change on a daily basis, and what we may have done to get our job done ten, or five or even one year ago may no longer be acceptable, appropriate or useful practice, the one constant we could see, as the day-to-day way of approaching our work changes and changes and changes, is that we cannot ever work totally independently. Now, as the first speaker today, I feel I am somewhat responsible for putting up the quick, rough framework, the progression, of what our trio will unfold, but I should confess to you all, that in a sort of Dickensian arrangement of the telling of a tale, we each have been given responsibility for a time period, and I, to keep with this same literary metaphor, come to you first as the ghost of librarianship past. Well, maybe I’m not quite a ghost, yet, to loosely paraphrase that poor, doomed, clownish soul hauled off the street by the traveling mortician in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, but, truly, I do beg for all of you not to see me as dead...

Beth Evans, LACUNY Dialogues, January 19, 2007

yet .. though I am the senior member of this group, and some would say, therefore, and at first glance, the vestige of the past.

Yes, I am the old lady in the crowd, and yes I am the senior CUNY librarian, an odd role, I find myself to be in, with just shy of thirteen years behind me on the job and what looks like a landscape of so many beginnings ahead of me in the future. But it's a job that has to be done – remembering the past – and so if these two youngsters beside me bring no more extensive baggage than recycled rubber wallets and keyless key chains that open cars with a series of beeps, than I will do the job and speak of the past, sage and gray and filled with nostalgia and more than happy, I promise you, to let some of it go.

So, first you will hear from me, recounting for all of the young folk who never saw them and for my contemporaries and seniors who lives in them and created them, the legends of libraries long since turned to dust. And then you will hear from Steve, who like a young Achilles, will run with you through our ever-changing present into the excitement and speculation of our future. Steve will hand off the baton to Daisy, who miraculously will pull it all together, reminding us that no matter how much things change, don't they all really stay so much the same? And so, with this as the plan, we set forth.

One of the first responsibilities I was given shortly after I started at Brooklyn College, untenured, on a substitute line, was a task designed to turn the concept of whom we work with as professionals directly on its head and challenge the notion of cooperation and

Beth Evans, LACUNY Dialogues, January 19, 2007

collaboration in the library. It was 1995, or so, the year of the birth of Windows 95, the year of the appearance on the market of Internet Explorer as a vigorous competitor to the giant in the browser market, Netscape Navigator, and we in the library were swamped at the reference desk with questions about how to close pop-ups, how to print images and which slot was made for the floppy disk. As you smile, charmed by the antique images of a computer age long gone and finger the flash drive hanging from the same key chain that holds the device that unlocks your car with a series of beeps, recognize that this was the time that would establish a new world order in the library, where technical knowledge of the innards of computers began to challenge the authority and importance of teaching a good search strategy and the bright, young computer wizzes in the library seemed to be taking over our world.

My job, at this watershed time, was to develop a support staff training manual that would clarify responsibilities for non-professional library personnel who would now be staffing, along side library faculty, the sanctified reference desk. This had never been done before and it was a change not warmly welcomed by a shrinking cadre of library faculty who had hard won their right to staff that desk through acquisition of at least two masters degrees and a demand for professional respect. Yes, we had worked with support staff before, yes, we had our CA's and our Gittlesons (that oddly named, and yet so important position of full-time, non-professional, classified staffers). But we had had the good sense, until this time, to keep these workers removed from public view. When the public came to the reference desk, confused about their own needs, very much in need of a

Beth Evans, LACUNY Dialogues, January 19, 2007

professional to tease through their awkwardly proposed requests, it was always a professional librarian who greeted them. This was all now due to change.

So why did Brooklyn College decide it needed to put non-professionals on the reference desk? The answer is really pretty simple. We were short staffed, down to about 16 library faculty. With memories of a time when dozens filled the ranks, the librarians at the reference desk needed help. With more and more questions coming in that required little of our professional expertise and more of an able body springing spryly around in sneakers, unjamming dedicated printers and rebotting frozen computers, in all honesty it didn't seem like a terrible betrayal to our professionalism to supplement our faculty at the reference desk with a technically-comfortable support staff being paid one half or a third of what librarians were paid.

The key, of course, to making a system such as this one, work, where tasks needed to be clearly defined, was that all needed to be vigilant as to when and where boundaries were being transgressed. Support staff were just fine, in fact, welcome, when it came to unjamming printers, but answering reference questions ... well that was another matter.

We at the Brooklyn College Library today still continue to struggle with how we maintain these divisions. Librarians, once only partnered with librarians at the reference desk, worked side-by-side as instructors, needing to give little thought to managing subordinates. With paraprofessionals sharing space at the reference desk, we now must

Beth Evans, LACUNY Dialogues, January 19, 2007

work both as instructors and as managers. During any given hour, we will both dig deeply into our carefully honed knowledge base to help a patron search out an obscure piece of information and turn to a part time worker to direct him or her to direct a student to the correct location in the library to find the music books. We are no longer in an environment where we can place our faith and trust in the common professional training we share with a colleague, but rather we must now place our faith and trust in our own ability to be ready to intervene when our own expertise is required.

Whether it is working with support staff or working with professional colleagues, the people we have partnered with most traditionally in libraries have always been other library employees. Although we haven't necessarily always worked side by side in our tasks, the reference librarians have always trusted that someone who works for a library, a librarian, a copy cataloguer, is responsible for putting together a dependable, high functioning catalog that will help us help our patrons get to the information and the books they need to continue with their research. Our bibliographers and selectors do a keen job of ordering materials best suited to the research needs of our patrons, our cataloguers do a most careful job of making the bibliographic components of what we have in our collection searchable, our reference librarians do a diligent job of assuring that patrons find what they need and our circulation staff courteously checks books out to the eager public while simultaneously assuring that it all finds its way home again, eventually. The library functions and functions well because people who work for the library control the flow of the information resources.

Even when our patrons need materials that we ourselves do not have or have not handled, we have always felt a great security in knowing that when we send these patrons off to distant lands, to other libraries, to other institutions, we know that librarians and others who work for libraries will ably take on the patron, passed as though a baton in a relay race, from one competent, library-trained set of hands to another. When our catalogue pulls up a book that we ourselves have not catalogued, but that comes into our catalogue from some distant town in Ohio, we are comforted in knowing that a librarian, or library-trained paraprofessional in that distant land has readied the book for our reader with the same skill and care that one of our own would have imparted.

More evidence of how much we as library faculty and library staff depend on our counterparts elsewhere to assure that where we cannot serve our patrons, our doubles can take our place is in the system of interlibrary lending. Can't find it here? Don't worry. Another library is sure to be able to supply. Let's look for it in another library.

For generations we as librarians have done our jobs confident that the skills of the players who work with us towards our goals are known and clearly defined. We worked in a safe, understandable world. We knew what to expect when we walked into work each day and we knew what to expect from the larger universe that made librarian work possible. Publishers had their place, reviewers had their place, books had their place. Even the teaching faculty at our institutions had their place, at their best generating the

Beth Evans, LACUNY Dialogues, January 19, 2007

literature, in a lesser capacity called upon for recommendations. And we, the librarians, had our place as the gate keepers to a carefully constructed body of offerings.

But now, all of this has changed. A closed system that once saw an idea from the mind of a scholar to the shelves of a library is opening wide open and all the rules of how the information gets from here to there, or if there is even, any more, a there, a final destination, these rules are all about to come tumbling down. And so the librarian, an important player in a carefully structured system, struggles to stay standing, to survey the new landscape and figure out, all a new, who's playing in this game with her? Or him?

Steve?

SOMETHING ABOUT FACULTY HELPING WITH COLLECTION WORK