

The Future Role of the Academic Liaison Librarian: A Literature Review

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"We are all searching for our future purpose" (Phipps, 2005).

Introduction

In 2005, the decision of the University of Wales at Bangor to make all of its subject librarians redundant caused shock and terror throughout the academic library world, both in the United Kingdom and beyond. Was this an aberration, or was it a straw in the wind?

The future of the liaison librarian in the university is an issue that currently occupies many minds. It is naturally of prime concern to the liaison librarians themselves, but it is also a significant issue for library managers. There is an interesting range of opinions on the subject, all claiming to plot emerging trends by extrapolating from current observations, and all pleasantly unhindered by empirical data. One study, at least, is candid enough to admit that "the future is difficult to predict" (Mullins, Allen, & Hufford, 2007).

It is normal now to find comments in the press along these lines: "with users switching to electronic access to resources instead of books, and using search engines instead of librarians to track down information, libraries face a struggle to remain relevant" (Caldwell, 2006). Not surprisingly, the library profession's view of the future is largely positive, with rallying cries such as: "there are no limits for academic librarians in the 21st century, there are, however, endless opportunities" (Rader, 2004).

We can only polish our crystal balls and guess at what the future may hold. It is nonetheless interesting to see what the profession has to say about its future, and this survey will review some of the recent writing on the subject.

Information Literacy

As many traditional library roles began to disappear in the early 1990s, the profession seized upon information literacy as its salvation. Academic librarians began the often painful process of reinventing themselves as teachers who would guide students through the complex process of information discovery and evaluation. To many, this

is still seen as a key role. Rader (2004), for example, in describing the work of liaison librarians, says that "above all, they strive to ensure that all students learn appropriate information skills to help them achieve information fluency and become productive members of the information society."

But do the students want to be taught? A recent survey of undergraduate students in the United States found that "respondents generally say they have 'good' to 'very good' skills for ... the university's online library system." However the researchers warn that "this response is likely overstated, considering that the literature on self-assessment of skills finds that students overrate their skills in general, men more so than women" (EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, 2007). There seems no reason to think that this will change. As Reyes (2006) puts it, "students want to be self-sufficient and have unmediated, immediate access to information. The very changes in our information technologies have changed this information seeking behavior, giving the control that once belonged to libraries over to the users."

Perhaps the more important question is: how do academic staff view the role of the librarian in educating students to find and evaluate information? A recent survey in the United Kingdom found that "the great majority of librarians see teaching information literacy and offering subject-based expertise as core roles for them, and central to what they do; researchers are generally supportive, but more equivocal about whether these are core as distinct from ancillary roles for librarians" (Research Information Network & Consortium of Research Libraries, 2007). A 2000 survey of academics and librarians in Canada found that "in the area of teaching/instruction, there was a sharp contrast between the librarians' willingness to collaborate and the faculty's lack of interest" (Ducas & Michaud-Oystryk, 2004).

Could it be that the material we are presenting in our classes is too elementary to meet the needs of our students? As Reyes (2006) remarks, "it is no longer sufficient to teach the mechanics of a single database. We can now move on to make correlations between keyword searching and rhetorical analysis in order to illustrate the use of language in scholarship." But are we really ready to move on? Asher (2003) argues that

what a librarian can't do ... is teach students to extract information from resources, theorise, or locate meaning. Teaching students to analyse data, evaluate ideas, and develop a philosophical understanding framed within a subject discipline are elements of information literacy that lie outside the expertise of most librarians. Universities hire academics to do that.

Reference Work

Many university libraries have reported a steady decline in inquiries at their reference desks, presumably because many students are now independently finding enough information for their needs. As Markey (2007) concluded "although research findings demonstrate that end users are not conducting sophisticated online searches, the vast majority are satisfied with their searches. In fact, percentages of users who express satisfaction with the results of their searches reach into the high seventies and beyond."

The consultation report that led to the redundancy of liaison librarians at the University of Wales at Bangor put it more bluntly "the process of literature searches is substantially de-skilled by online bibliographic resources" (quoted in Chillingworth, 2005).

The recent literature repeatedly calls for more flexible delivery of information services. For example, a report from the United States asserted that "future librarians will increasingly need to take their skills to the clients that need assistance. That model, sometimes referred to as 'place as library,' could be virtual (chat/web conferencing) or in person in remote site classrooms or offices, but the organizational model will change to accommodate the 'traveling' staff model" (IMLS Task Force on Future of Librarians in the Workforce -- University Libraries, 2006).

One American librarian has gone so far as to suggest that "librarians could even be assigned to live in dorms, in exchange for room and board, so that they are truly available, visible, and a part of the college student's world" (Posner, 2002). Presumably only young, single librarians need apply for these positions, and this also suggests that there may be problems in recruiting staff to provide these innovative outreach services. When the library at George Mason University in Virginia opened a new information commons, it specially recruited staff to work in this very different environment. Even so, some staff were dissatisfied, especially because of the long opening hours. The manager suggested "perhaps we should begin to look to the retail environment for our recruits" (Kifer, 2005). Clearly she has a point: to refugees from Wal-Mart, any library must look like a pleasant work environment. It remains to be seen whether the refugees from Wal-Mart will make good librarians.

The previously cited IMLS Task Force report (2006) suggests that virtual reference services could be outsourced. In a similar vein, the director of the Law Library at the University of Colorado at Boulder has suggested that in the future

faculty can expect round-the-clock reference and research assistance. However, they should not be surprised if their midnight reference questions are answered by someone on the other side of the world. Computer tech support has already moved overseas, pioneering the way for other services to follow. Why shouldn't libraries form worldwide consortia to provide 24/7 research assistance, for practical and for financial reasons? This could be a boon when you have a request in the wee hours of the morning that calls for a straightforward answer, such as the identification of the source of a quotation, but it could mean less quality or less precision in responses requiring more complex research (Bintliff, 2004).

A university librarian in England has argued that university libraries have not put sufficient staff resources into dealing with inquiries. He has developed plans for providing increased support for users, but admits that his plans are "not fully funded" (Sykes, 2005).

Research Support

If undergraduates are now finding much of the information they need via Google and Wikipedia, surely there is still a need for experienced librarians to meet the more advanced information needs of researchers?

A recent survey of researchers at Deakin University in Victoria reported that "a recurring theme of the interviews was the need for research assistants to undertake information seeking, in particular library-related information seeking. While this was commonplace with many senior researchers, it was a very attractive proposition to those without such assistance and/or those with limited research funding" (Moncrieff, Macauley, & Epps, 2007).

Funding is indeed the key issue here and many libraries will be unable to afford to provide experienced, highly qualified librarians to provide in-depth research assistance to all postgraduate students and academic staff. Brookman and her colleagues discussed the advantages of having an "informationist" attached to clinical teams in a UK hospital trust, but concluded that "funding is not available for the full implementation of the informationist model" (Brookman, Lovell, Henwood, & Lehmann, 2006).

On the other hand, there are areas where funding is more generous, and in these situations it may be possible to provide high level research assistance. Bintliff (2004) sees her law library providing such services in the future:

Faculty can expect more customized information coming from the library, more information that is tailored to support an individual's specific scholarship and teaching. Faculty will find more information 'pushed' at them even before they ask for it, as librarians use 'faculty interest databases' to track and anticipate faculty requests. Librarians will capitalize on the ever-faster ability to receive, assemble, and disseminate information via electronic communications. In addition, librarians will work with faculty to compile an array of information and sources adapted to their specific needs.

Even where funding is available, there is still the question of the level of disciplinary knowledge required to provide research support at an advanced level. The study of clinical librarians conducted by Brookman and her colleagues (2006) looked at the possibility of librarians going beyond information retrieval to evaluation and appraisal and found that "those who argued against having the C[linical] L[ibrarian] evaluating the literature, put forward the argument that to critically appraise the sources it is necessary to have a clinical background and real knowledge of the context of the work."

Pagel (2005) reports that, for liaison librarians at Emory University in Georgia, "subject expertise is becoming the norm." Advanced subject expertise, probably at doctoral level, will be necessary if liaison librarians are to convince academics that a librarian can be a real partner in the research process. When Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk (2004) surveyed academics at the University of Manitoba, they found that, on the question of collaboration with librarians on research projects, "performing a literature search ... was [an] area where both groups saw potential for collaboration. In

all other areas, faculty were much less receptive to collaboration with librarians." A recent survey of academics and librarians in the UK found that both groups agreed in not seeing a core role for librarians as "subject-based experts embedded in departments or research groups" (Research Information Network & Consortium of Research Libraries, 2007).

Information Technology

Librarians and library staff have to be very tech savvy, especially given the popularity of information commons and the ubiquity of information workstations ... The major challenge will be retraining the staff member who prefers to keep doing what he/she has been doing in the same way it has been done, who sees their value to students and researchers as one shared with their traditional mode rather than be attuned to actual values perceived by the younger generation of students and faculty who have been educated within a technological environment (IMLS Task Force on Future of Librarians in the Workforce -- University Libraries, 2006).

There is general agreement in the literature that liaison librarians of the future will need sophisticated IT skills. A survey of an international group of senior academic librarians revealed that, with regard to skills of future academic librarians, "IT and communication skills remain at the top" (Feret & Marcinek, 2005).

That is not to say that liaison librarians will need degrees in information technology, but they will need to be highly skilled at keeping abreast of developments which will be of use to them and their clients:

University libraries, both in teaching and in research institutions, can no longer provide core services without assistance from and cooperation with central I[nformation] S[ystems] departments ... Learning to work with those cultures and seeking collaboration at every turn is essential. Learning to evaluate technology and make technology-based decisions is critical for the university library staff in every functional area (IMLS Task Force on Future of Librarians in the Workforce -- University Libraries, 2006).

Burnett and Bonnici (2006) have examined some of the questions that this raises for the training and accreditation of librarians. They argue that "the future of librarianship is seriously implicated ... by the demonstrated inability of the discipline of information studies ... to establish its claim to a unique body of abstract knowledge." These concerns are perhaps vindicated by Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk (2004), whose survey of librarians and academics at the University of Manitoba found that "in the area of information technology, both librarians (49%) and faculty (43%) ranked assistance with retrieving an electronic document the highest." If retrieving an electronic document is the acme of their IT skills (real or perceived), liaison librarians definitely have cause for concern.

Other Roles

There are a range of other tasks that are seen as being important for the liaison librarian of the future. A UK study reported that

there are ... a number of additional roles that librarians are interested in developing: providing specialist advice in copyright and I[n]tellectual P[roperty] R[ights] issues; managing non-technical metadata issues; acting as technology specialists in facilitating access to electronic resources; and – most importantly – managing institutional repositories of digital information. With respect to copyright advice, some libraries already employ specialist lawyers; others told us that they had taken the role into the library from other places (e.g. the registry) where it had previously resided" (Research Information Network & Consortium of Research Libraries, 2007).

A recent American report on the top ten assumptions for the future of academic libraries stated that "there will be an increased emphasis on digitizing collections, preserving digital archives, and improving methods of data storage and retrieval ... Librarians should collaborate with disciplinary colleagues in the curation of data as part of the research process" (Mullins et al., 2007).

The same report predicted that "distance learning will be an increasingly more common option in higher education" (Mullins et al., 2007), and a recent UK study found that many librarians saw the facilitation of e-learning as a core role for the future, although academics did not appear to share that opinion (Research Information Network & Consortium of Research Libraries, 2007).

The recent literature has surprisingly little to say about collection development, but at least one study maintains "that the importance of research library collections only continues to increase" (Mullins et al., 2007). Phipps (2005) however is less certain: "will we continue to 'build' collections? Oh, I know, there will always be books. And for at least five more years the dominant form will be print. Then what?" Some academic library managers have forecast a more extreme scenario where "libraries may be replaced altogether by a single net collection operated by government or other institution" (Feret & Marcinek, 2005). This latter scenario may not be far-fetched: in Germany the federal government has already negotiated nation-wide licences for databases from Emerald and Springer.

Barry (2002) makes an interesting point about career structure:

A challenge for the profession is the need to create job structures so that the only way to progress financially in the field is not through management positions. Administrative work takes time away from the continued skill development needed to stay current with the rapidly evolving information environment. Placing high performers in these positions often does nothing but waste the time and energy required for maintaining currency and effectiveness in their positions.

Conclusion

From reading the literature, a composite picture emerges of the liaison librarian of the future. It shows a young, outgoing professional who is comfortable hanging out in campus cafes and student halls of residence and able to communicate easily with

undergraduate students. At the same time, he or she will be a subject expert, with advanced knowledge of the literature of one or more disciplines and able to work closely with academic staff and postgraduate students. On top of this, our liaison librarian will be extremely proficient with technology and an expert with various software packages used for teaching and research.

Clearly there is nobody who fits this Identikit picture. It is easy to see why so many of our current liaison librarians feel under stress (and underpaid). We cannot go on pretending that liaison librarians can provide such an impossibly wide range of services.

So what will become of the liaison librarian's role? Perhaps it will split into a variety of roles, each re-aligning itself with other roles to create a new range of professionals. In the university of the future, we may see a group of Learning Support staff, who provide undergraduate students with training and support in a range of study, information and writing skills. We may see another group of Research Support staff, who combine an information specialist role with a more conventional research assistant role and are attached to academic or research units throughout the university. And we will certainly find IT staff who specialise in applications used in teaching, e-learning and research, probably as part of the university's central IT support infrastructure.

The final word belongs to a reference librarian at Queen's University in Ontario:

For librarians, two scenarios loom on the horizon. The optimistic or all-encompassing future demands that librarians be enthusiastic and flexible enough to create a dynamic learning environment. These librarians will be adept at creating an intellectual landscape densely populated with electronic information sources and rich with a variety of services tailored to shifting needs. The pessimistic future is a passive one where our services and spaces are underused and irrelevant to students and faculty. This future is likely to evolve unless librarians respond creatively to the impact of electronic resources in academic libraries. Administrators who fail to make the transition will see their institutions fall far behind their counterparts. Librarians who cannot or will not make the transition will witness the loss of their workplace as they know it and lose their roles in it. (Burton, 2005)

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