

My Job in 10 Years: The Future of Academic Libraries **By John Dupuis, York University**

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We're in a very exciting time for academic libraries. The Web is changing everything about the way we do business – reference, instruction, cataloguing, liaison, outreach, even the way we hold conferences. However, the changes that the web is causing have not fully taken hold yet, so we're profoundly in a period of transition in the profession. We need to embrace new possibilities to remain relevant to students in the future but we can't fully abandon what we've been doing for fear of not meeting the needs of the students we have to support today. We can see the movement to ebooks, for example, but students still very much need to the print books we currently have in our collections so the transition has to be carefully managed.

The future of academic libraries is a popular topic in the library blogosphere and in the professional journals and a long bibliography would be quite easy to compile. One of the best recent examples is David W. Lewis's "A Strategy for Academic Libraries in the First Quarter of the 21st Century" from the September 2007 *College and Research Libraries*. He sets out a clear five part program for meeting the challenges of the 21st century: 1) complete the move to online collections; 2) retire (and preserve) legacy print collections; 3) redevelop the library as the campus' prime learning space; 4) embed library online resources into teaching, learning and research activities and 5) change the focus from purchasing to curating collections.

I'm going to take a bit of a different tack in this article. I'll be looking at the kinds of things that we'll be doing in our everyday jobs as librarians in academic communities and how they will be changing. And not just the things that we'll be doing directly, but also the things we will be supporting and advocating for in our libraries and on our campuses. One of the nice things about the collegial models of academic institutions is that, in a sense, everything is everybody's business; we're all responsible for governance.

The lens through which I'll be viewing our everyday jobs is also a bit different. The concept of a reputation economy is one that is becoming quite popular in Internet culture – the idea that the attention that an entity receives in the culture is what is important. That attention is converted into a positive reputation and that, in turn, is converted into some sort of reward, whether it be money or a prestigious appointment.

Richard Akerman, Technology Architect at CISTI, puts it very well on his blog, *Science Library Pad*:

"Attention is the first currency of the digital realm...Reputation is the second currency of the digital realm...To me this means that in the digital realm, you have to stop thinking you're in the XYZ business...and start thinking that you're in the attention and reputation business."
(http://scilib.typepad.com/science_library_pad/2008/01/the-currencies.html)

What does it mean for libraries and librarians to be in the attention and reputation business? And through that lens, how can we build those libraries while doing our day-to-day jobs, creating the future in our daily routines?

Let's take a quick look some of the things we do every day in our jobs, take a look at what the key issues are and try and see how being in the attention and reputation business affects those everyday tasks.

Collections

The core issue in collections development that we'll be dealing with over the next ten years is very simple. We have to decide what's worth paying for. As we shift from print to online, from purchasing to licensing and as our users expect more and more to be available on the free web it's going to be harder and harder for us to decide what is worth spending our limited resources on. What sector is going to be the biggest loser? It's probably going to be the A&I database vendors as they struggle to compete with free web discovery tools. We're going to want to spend our money to purchase, license and create collections for our patrons that they can't get anywhere else -- what's going to get their attention and build our reputation as information providers.

Reference

The core issue in reference service is helping our patrons with their information needs where they actually are rather than where we would like them to be. And this means being both practical and visionary. Nothing beats face-to-face contact with students, helping them solve their information problem and creating a solid connection between the students and our services. But as their lives become more mobile and distributed and computing becomes more ubiquitous in their lives, so must the ways we provide reference. Some of the new tools to provide reference are already popular, such as chat reference, instant messaging and text messaging. Others, such as virtual environments, aren't ready for prime time yet but may be incredibly important going forward. Reference has always been about making patrons aware of the service we have to offer -- getting their attention. It will increasingly be about making sure we are at least as trusted a source for their information needs as the plethora of other options.

Instruction

The core issue is maintaining access to the student bodies in our institution. Right now, we're in a golden age of Information Literacy instruction. In many of our institutions, we've never been so successful in integrating our instructional goals into academic programs. However, our challenge will be to make this success sustainable. First of all, to maintain and grow our IL programs we'll need to make the case to possibly skeptical faculty and administration that we have our own specialized knowledge and expertise to offer to their increasingly web-savvy students. To do this, we'll have to complete our transition from teaching the how's of literature searching to the what's and why's. In other words, the value we can add to the educational process is to help faculty educate their students in the patterns of scholarly communication and the different types of documents that are relevant in their disciplines rather than the mechanics of searching. The other big shift we'll have to complete is to embrace a wide variety of delivery modes for our instruction. From online tutorials to teaching in virtual environments, from classroom or lab settings to just-in-time interventions, we'll have to go where the students are when they need our help and advice.

Physical Environment

The core issue surrounding the physical environment of our libraries is making sure that we remain the preferred collaborative and study space on our campuses. Amidst the hype and hoopla about social software, discovery layers and all the rest, sometimes we lose sight of

the simple fact that our libraries are essentially brick and mortal institutions. We occupy physical space on increasingly crowded campuses where we will continue to have to justify the prime real estate we occupy and to advocate and lobby hard for funds to either renovate and repurpose our space or build new buildings.

Our jobs will be to take the space that retiring print collections and the money rejigging our collections has freed up and use them to build a wide variety of spaces to satisfy a wide variety of student needs. Those needs will certainly include cafes, group and collaborative spaces, quiet study and reflection, multimedia authoring, casual and relaxing spaces and some we haven't even imagined yet. At the same time, we have to watch for what I call vision drift. If we ultimately transform ourselves into just another version of the campus student centre, we will have compromised our core value of supporting the academic mission of our institutions.

The Library Web

The core issue in building library web presences is not so much finding a key tool or set of online services, because those change as fast as the weather. The important thing is to keep our focus on our patrons. To remember that we build our online presence for them, to enhance their educational experience and not to satisfy our own curiosity or technophilia. At the same time, we must approach the task of building the virtual library with an open mind and a willingness to experiment. If we are trying to anticipate what online communities and environments our patrons need us in, we have to accept that we might guess wrong. The first challenge is to find ways to get our systems in front of our users amidst an increasing crowded and chaotic information landscape. The second challenge is to build systems that our patrons will find worth using.

Our jobs will evolve in two main ways to deal with the virtual environment. First of all, we will have to advocate in our libraries and on our campuses for the best, most open, most responsive and usable systems our IT departments can design and build. As well, we have a responsibility to use the technologies available to us remix, build and mash-up our own systems, ones that are responsive at a micro level to our individual communities. The growth and evolution of web technologies will allow us to do both.

Community Engagement

The core issue for community engagement brings us back to the beginning. So many of the things we need to do in our jobs rely on the fact that we need our patrons to first know what we have to offer and, second, to see those things as worthwhile. Attention and reputation. And it applies to our collections as much as to our instructional efforts and the systems we set up.

It seems to me that the secret here is to engage our communities like never before. To engage administrators and student leaders, to be front and centre with the faculty we liaise with, to be at the table when campus-wide IT decisions are made. To the extent that we're doing these things today, we're going to have to really turn it up a notch. In the past, we were able to assume that the entire campus community was more or less automatically engaged and interested in what was going on at the library. No longer. We'll have to take our story to every nook and cranny, every day, each of us to advocate for our place in the institution.

And we also have to engage the broader academic community too, both online and in person. We need to join and participate in the social networks not only of our own faculty but also to build the reputation of our profession by joining disciplinary and other networks. When was the last time you attended (and presented at!) a conference aimed primarily at faculty or administrators rather than librarians? It's our way to promote our whole profession.

The Way Forward

A lot of what I've mentioned above is stuff we're already doing, or at least trying to do. Each of our institutions are very different, with diverse histories and programs and student bodies. The exact shape of our futures will be reflected by that diversity. Some of us may emphasize curation of collections while others may focus on the physical library and that's inevitable. Our responses may vary, but the forces acting on our institutions will be largely the same. It is by focusing on getting the attention of our patrons and using that attention to build our reputations as information experts on campus that we will build our futures as integral parts of our communities.

It seems to me that the best strategy to prepare ourselves for an uncertain future is to be engaged in imagining the possibilities for the future and, even more, to work towards creating that future. To quote myself from the concluding blog post of my series, "I want to facilitate a future, one that is good for our patrons but one that also has me in it. And I think that's what we should all aspire to in our professional lives, to bringing about the best future we can imagine, for ourselves and our patrons."

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This article was adapted from the blog posts and conference presentation found at <http://jdupuis.blogspot.com/....>