

My Job in TEN Years

The Future of Academic Libraries

by **John Dupuis**

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 the profession is in a period of profound transition.

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 e-books, for example, but students still very much need 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 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 & 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's prime learning space
- 4) Embed library online resources into teaching, learning, and research activities
- 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.

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," he writes. "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" (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 in our jobs and what the key issues are, and try to see how being in the attention and reputation business affects those everyday tasks.

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. 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.

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. 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 renovate, repurpose our space, or build new

buildings. Our jobs will be to take the space that retiring print collections and the money re-jigging our collections has freed up and use it 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.

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 at 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.

COLLECTIONS

The core issue in collections development that we'll be dealing with over the next 10 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.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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, and 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.

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 and to remember that we build our online presence 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 increasingly crowded and chaotic information landscape. The second challenge is to build systems that our patrons will find worthwhile.

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 is very different, with diverse histories, programs, and student bodies. The exact shape of our futures will be reflected by that diversity. 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 out patrons."

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from <http://scienceblogs.com/confessions/>

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