



Change is a constant in academic libraries, yet making change can be hard. We'll explore ways to create the conditions that encourage creativity and experimentation in our libraries. We'll talk about how consumerism, technological determinism, and the surveillance-industrial complex have influenced libraries. We'll consider how our organizations can embody the values of the profession as we help our communities practice freedom.

I love the theme for this year's Superconference – “think it, do it” – because so many good ideas for our libraries come out of moments of improvisation or daydreaming or out of a conversation that turns from “I wish we could” or “wouldn't it be cool if” to concrete ideas, ideas we can act on, ideas that will make a difference. That said, our profession has a tendency to shy away from the impromptu and the playful. We want to know that new things will succeed before we invest a lot of time and money in them. We put them through a gauntlet of committees to seek approval. We wonder if other libraries have done it, how they did it, and whether it worked. We put it off until our real work is done. We have to get permission first. What would it take to make our libraries more playful, more improvisational, more creative? What can we do to move away from a culture where we avoid risk or where support is contingent on getting the okay from someone in authority? How did we get into this mess in the first place?

Libraries, which espouse intellectual freedom, diversity, and democracy, aren't very good at honoring those things in their own organizations. Libraries typically have administrative organization charts, with power concentrated at the top, rather than draw on the community-of-equals model that (ideally) is the organizing principle of an academic faculty. New ideas about organizational structure have tended to be drawn from the pages of the *Harvard Business Review*, which is ironic if you stop and think about it. For years, libraries have been busy forming teams, being flattened, throwing fish, moving cheese, acting like a start-up, and being disrupted for years. Now that the rest of higher education has fully adopted a business model, we're now being asked to measure the library's return on investment. We have to have evidence for our administrations to prove that we should be allowed to exist in a highly competitive and austere environment.

So these are strange contradictions for library organizations. We believe in democracy and intellectual freedom – except at work – and while we say we serve our communities, we’re thrown into a *Hunger Games* competition against other contenders for funds, while each of our institutions competes for students, research dollars, and attention. This competitive stance fights against our fundamental belief that everyone should have access to information, not just the privileged, and that when it come to the advancement of knowledge, sharing works better than hoarding. This is why we push back on copyright laws that tilt toward intellectual property owners. This is why we developed interlibrary loan schemes. This is why our willingness to accept DRM-laden ebooks and licensing agreements that prohibit sending PDFs of article to other libraries flies in the face of what we do and why we exist.

As we talk about this situation, certain words tend to crop up again and again, keywords that deserve some unpacking.

First, the word “change.” I cringed a bit when I put this word in the description of today’s talk. I got heartily sick being told throughout the nineties that change was inevitable, that it was scary and had to be managed. That we weren’t doing it right. More recently, the change narrative has grown apocalyptic. We’re being disrupted. Creatively destroyed. The future is one big death threat and only those willing to hasten the demise of the old will be saved. This definition of change is violent and dystopian. It’s something that is portrayed as both destructive and inevitable.



This is an ahistorical and uncritical way to think about change. It assumes we are the way we are because we always have been that way, but now we have to do things differently or we will be replaced by nimbler competition.

Which brings us to another key word that comes up often in connection with change: “irrelevance.” If we don’t embrace new things, right now, nobody will want us anymore. This is a curious fear. Libraries have an enormous amount of social capital. There are few municipal services that are as well-loved as public libraries, and it’s hard to imagine a university without a library, though we’ve all met people in higher administration who doubt whether we actually need one, what with the Internet and all. We went through a period of doubt early in this millennium when the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published a cover story about “deserted libraries,” kicking off a sustained defense of the value of the space occupied by academic libraries on university campuses. It contributed to many efforts to make that space more welcoming and focused on learning rather than storage of collections, and it made our successes more public. You won’t find a preponderance of students or faculty who believe libraries are an irrelevant waste of money. But these days, the dominant narrative of How Things Work is through competition and market dominance, and so we fear losing market share to our competitors – which, in reality, they aren’t.

On the other side, certain keywords are used to challenge new things. Consider “sustainability” – not in the sense of environmental impact. Too rarely do we factor into our thinking what a warming planet means for the ways we will create, share, and preserve knowledge in the future, and that’s a



serious problem. No, this use of the word really means “how will you pay for this new thing and keep it going?” which is a brilliant way to stop something in its tracks. Often, a new project can only advance if there is a thoroughly-developed “business model” that will provide resources to keep the new thing going. What’s especially troubling about this is that we don’t ask this question of the things we’re already doing, many of which we know perfectly well are unsustainable. New things have to prove themselves. Old things don’t.

“Community” is a word we use a lot. Libraries serve their communities, which is a noble thing. Ideally, we shape our collections and expend resources to meet the needs of the people who use our libraries, and to do that, we try to stay on top of what courses of study are offered, what the students in those courses need, and what our faculty want for their teaching and research. Ideally, it creates a real intimacy with library users while involving them in defining what the library is and should be. But it’s hard to be curatorial in an era of aggregated packages, and this focus on community has a dark side. It becomes a defense of exclusivity – community is defined by who is and is not included. How much time and effort do we spend to guard our licensed content from outsiders? How often do we make decisions that reinforce exclusivity because these concessions seem beneficial for our narrowly-defined “us”? Why do we claim that scholarly inquiry is valuable, that scholarship matters, yet feel perfectly comfortable closing and locking the gates as soon as students graduate or adjunct faculty lose their contracts?

Value is a word that, when it’s made singular, really troubles me. This is part of an unfortunate shift that narrows our focus to a privileged community and to corporate-style branding of colleges and universities as a commodity. Twenty years ago, we began to rethink how we describe the value of libraries and higher education generally, turning from numbers (how many volumes we have in the library) to assessing how well students are learning, and (for librarians) how the library contributes. This was resisted for good reason by faculty who feared greater administrative control of the curriculum and a bean-counter focus on easily measurable things. But for those of us who care a lot about students and their learning (and who often have relatively few volumes to boast about), the threat of managerial micromanagement was overcome by our genuine curiosity about what students were learning and where they had difficulty, and being told to focus on those questions seemed a valuable opportunity to learn interesting things. In the past five years or so, the focus of this assessment has shifted to something else. We’re asked to create dashboards that can communicate our value to funders and are pressed to produce reports that link library funding to institutional goals such as retention of tuition-paying students, success in getting grants, and enhancing the public profile of the institution.

So we're back to counting things, but worse: we now have the capacity to count lots of things all the time with incredible granularity, so now we're invited to participate in the surveillance-industrial complex that will collect and crunch lots of big numbers about our patrons for their own good. There are vocal proponents of "learning analytics" in libraries these days, which means watching individuals from many angles so that you can chide them when they waste time, guide them when they head in the wrong direction, or correct them when they need correction. I hardly know how to express how much this appalls me, and seeing it applied to libraries' effort to demonstrate return on investment makes me want to weep. We're back to the Dickensian classroom of Mr. Grandgrind, but instead of facts, we want numbers – because numbers are so true.



We do need to know more about our students' experiences, and there are any number of valuable ways to investigate their learning. Project Information Literacy is doing it. So are a number of ethnographic researchers who have designed informative studies. So do practitioners who probe student experiences using mixed methods. They do it without invading anyone's privacy. They do it so that what we learn can be shared. They do it while meeting standards of informed consent. I'm a bit of a curmudgeon on this score, but I believe we need to think hard before signing on to schemes that don't meet standards of informed consent, however informative they may be. We need to ask ourselves how implicated we are in a discourse of fear – that if we can't prove we're worth the money, we'll be cut.

The corporatization of the university, the narratives of inevitable destruction, and the drive to answer our questions with data rather than with careful human observation is part of a trend to



concentrate power. Historian Jill Lepore made a scathing [critique](#) of "disruptive innovation," Clayton Christensen's influential theory that purports to explain why doing the right thing in business is actually the wrong thing. According to his theory, allowing workers a chance to care enough about their work to improve a product or process is bad for business because the business will be disrupted by someone who can do it faster and cheaper. Better to cut your workforce in the name of efficiency and put your bets on entrepreneurs who doesn't have to worry about tomorrow but can make a killing today.

This is part of a contemporary fable that individual entrepreneurs are smarter than organizations, that if you must have an organization, for heaven's sake don't let just anyone make decisions, that we live in a meritocracy and those who succeed deserve their success, and that failure is fine so long as you have the connections to fail again and again using other people's money. If not,

you're among the disrupted. Christensen's theory of disruption was attractive to capitalists because it concentrates decision-making in the hands of a few. Workers were a problem to be solved because they cost too much and can be found elsewhere cheaper. As Lepore points out, this theory has been applied in all kinds of situations, regardless of an organization's purpose.

Innovation and disruption are ideas that originated in the arena of business but which have since been applied to arenas whose values and goals are remote from the values and goals of business . . . Disruptive innovation is a theory about why businesses fail. It's not more than that. It doesn't explain change. It's not a law of nature. It's an artifact of history, an idea, forged in time; it's the manufacture of a moment of upsetting and edgy uncertainty. Transfixed by change, it's blind to continuity. It makes a very poor prophet.

Furthermore, she says that Christensen's theory is based on cherry-picked evidence that in many cases has proven wrong – yet we've come to think this kind of scorched-earth change is inevitable. It's not, and we should resist it.

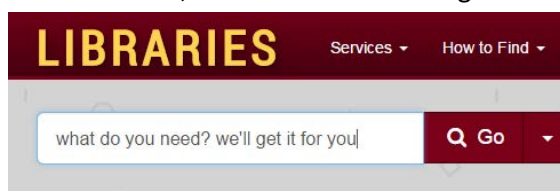
Chris Newfield, who among other subjects studies "critical university studies," had an interesting [commentary](#) on this debate, saying that disruption isn't really just a theory about failure, it's really a theory of governance that challenges earlier management gurus Tom Peters, Peter Drucker, and Peter Senge. They had suggested that the way to make the shift from a manufacturing economy to something new was to confront the failures of managers and the power they held and give employees a chance to participate in decisions that could improve quality and help companies adjust to changing markets. Organizations could learn, if they were allowed to.

This is a really interesting issue for libraries. We need to encourage creativity, reflection, and formal curiosity to do our jobs well. We need to question whether the way we've been doing things still is important or whether we should be doing something else with our resources. We do need to change. But if we are driven by fear of disruption or irrelevance, we retreat into the splendid isolation of our institutional goals and an exclusive sense of who can be part of the community we serve, and this is very bad for libraries, for the advancement of knowledge, and for the public good. In the long run, it's not even good for our institutions.



Let's think back for a minute about how libraries have changed over the years. Once they were reserved for the literate few and were designed to serve solitary contemplation and study. It has only been since the middle of the 19th century that we've thought of libraries as civic monuments, public places where whole communities can gather and learn. They became places that promised betterment for the masses but also had a civilizing mission. They promoted not just freedom, but order. It has only been since the latter half of the twentieth century, during the boom years after World War II, that we thought of libraries as the suppliers of vast amounts of knowledge. And it's only since the 1990s that we've decided owning stuff is not particularly worthwhile, yet libraries of all sizes and types should

strive to provide access to almost everything. Google and Amazon made our collections look paltry. The drive to offer the maximum amount of consumer choice has made it seem necessary for us to offer everything on demand while saving nothing for the future. Meanwhile, our students are taking on a lifetime of debt and our faculty are producing like mad because their jobs are so precarious. We know this is unsustainable, but doing things differently – taking a percentage of our budget and staff time to directly support open access, for example – seems radical and risky, if not downright illegal.

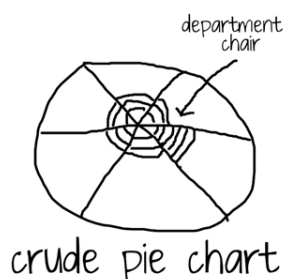


But here’s the thing: change is nothing new for libraries. To assume otherwise is to forget our history and to surrender our values to market fundamentalism. We have more power than we think. We have values that the world needs.

How can we create within our own libraries and among the profession a culture that nurtures experimentation and a willingness to offer an alternative to technological and market determinism? One approach might be to analyze our own organizational structures to see how power is distributed and who is granted agency. When I did a small and unscientific survey of librarians a couple of years ago asking what innovations they had seen at their libraries over the past year, two very different impediments surfaced. In some libraries, new ideas weren’t welcome and so were put to tests they couldn’t pass. In other libraries, so much energy was devoted to restructuring the organization that it was difficult to get anything done. What we need is stable organizations that welcome ideas and don’t get bogged down in the exquisite detail of reporting lines or team formation.

A healthy library organization is a trusting one in which everyone shares fundamental values, can explain the purpose of the library in terms that are fairly consistent, and sees how the work they each do contributes to that purpose. This kind of organization is a place where everyone who is affected by a decision is involved in making it. It’s a place where there’s a lot of freedom for individuals to play to their strengths and make the decisions they are best placed to make, without having to ask someone else for permission, but also a place where big decisions are made collectively, so that important perspectives aren’t overlooked. It’s a place where people feel not only comfortable disagreeing but where multiple perspectives are made welcome and, if necessary, coaxed into the open. It’s a place with a healthy respect for individual differences coupled with a common concern for the greater good. It’s a place that doesn’t let “the way we do it” be the default setting that has to be overcome before something new can be tried. It’s a place where people don’t sit back and expect someone else to make the hard decisions but are willing to step up and play a role in doing difficult things. It’s a place where people believe that we can make the world a better place, that collectively we are not helpless.

I’m going to take a page from Clayton Christensen’s book and illustrate this with a cherry-picked example. Twenty years ago, we had a traditional library organization, and it wasn’t working very well. Some of the librarians at my college proposed that we operate like an academic department, which technically we were. We argued that having a director for six librarians and eight-and-a-half staff was like having an admiral for a dinghy, that we could elect a chair as other departments do, and make decisions about budgets and programs together. A colleague drew a diagram on a napkin to show the dean how the librarians might share the role of chair, forever afterward called the “crude pie chart” . This transition was not without a lot of strife, and of course, we aren’t exactly like other departments.

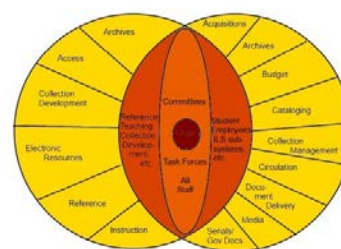


We have more non-faculty employees who are critical to our work than other departments, we have a never-big-enough budget that is, still, much larger than most departmental budgets, and we have no major but an obligation to serve all programs on campus, so have less autonomy in curricular affairs than other departments. But we went ahead with this collegial management model and over time worked out an understanding of how we would all work together – – called the “crude pie chart on drugs,” which decisions were faculty responsibilities

and which belonged to the non-faculty staff, which would be shared, and how to balance the sharing of decision-making with individuals’ rights to make decisions about their own areas. It’s not always smooth sailing, but no library organization is, and we’ve confronted a variety of challenges since then, from rebuilding after a tornado to budget cuts, and we’ve done it by working together.

Collegial decision-making operates along the same principles as those attributed by philosopher of science Michael Polanyi to what he called “the Republic of Science” – or one could say, the Republic of Knowledge – the process of negotiation and discovery used to create, refine, and rethink what we know. Membership in this republic requires three things: professional expertise, trust, and a disinterested urge to further the work of the whole. Authority rests neither in the individual nor in a higher body that organizes the work, but in the members of the group. The freedom its members enjoy is not a personal but a public liberty. This is the ideal of the self-governing academic department—and seemed to us a natural structure for libraries which, after all, exist to enable the activities of this republic.

Now, while this has worked for us, there are reasons it might not at another institution. Being small means we can all sit down and discuss issues when we have to, or make urgent decisions quickly, and our campus culture supports decentralized, inclusive decision-making. We also have a relatively straightforward mission: we’re focused on undergraduate learning. A large institution serving many masters has a more complex job to do. Not all librarians are eager to take on the responsibilities of a director. When making a new hire, we’ve possibly excluded some talented folks because when they see that they have to be willing and able to serve as department chair someday, they look for a position where they won’t have those responsibilities. There’s also the problem of rewarding people appropriately. Work changes, but salaries don’t. Our non-faculty staff have responsibilities and skills that are, quite frankly, not rewarded appropriately, and whenever a position is open we have to make a case to people who don’t use libraries that it’s needed. These are challenges we would have regardless of our organization chart, but they are real problems that challenge our participatory decision-making. Still, we’ve found this model works on a practical level, and it gives me faith that every academic library, however it organizes itself, ideally can consider resetting its permissions to allow its staff to share information and decisions at the highest level possible.



crude pie chart on drugs

Libraries are about service, about sharing, about being open to new things. Our culture is already collaborative and responsive to our local community of users. We need a climate of intellectual freedom to safely hold the conversations we need to have, and a commitment to use those conversations to solve problems and take advantage of opportunities.



And for libraries to thrive, we need to do more than serve our communities defined by who belongs this fiscal year. We have to make a case for making knowledge available to the world, not just to our members. We have to make a case for the commons, and that will mean making hard decisions about what terms we accept from vendors and whether we'll put our resources toward open access projects – something we need to take on soon, before open becomes simply another profitable business model for giant corporations.

Now I should try to fulfill the promise I made in the description of this talk and say something about how we can create the conditions that encourage creativity and experimentation in our libraries – not necessarily by redrawing our org charts. Here are some suggestions that might be adaptable to your organizations.

- Think critically about the power relationships you and your colleagues hold, what drives them, and where change can take root. There may be situations that are set in stone and will be difficult to change, but chances are there are places in your organization that are open to doing things differently. Try making changes there. Cultures may change slowly, but they change, and you have to start somewhere.
- Look behind the set-in-stone positions people typically take and explore them, giving people a chance to explain publicly why they feel the way they do. Years ago, I had a senior colleague who resisted new things out of habit, and out of habit we grew accustomed to him holding veto power until a new librarian joined the staff. In meetings, he would roll his eyes and we would all sigh, thinking “well, that’s the end of that.” She challenged that assumption by asking him point blank “what do you think? You seem to have an opinion. We need to hear it.” And that made all the difference. Suddenly we realized doing things the way we had been doing them didn’t have to be the default position, that doing something new didn’t have to prove itself by a standard that wasn’t applied to our current practices, that there was no absolute veto power. This was a moment when we recognized our own agency.
- Along those lines, think about and question the long-term consequences of decisions that seem rational at the moment. We don’t have to accept the terms of every vendor contract. We don’t have to get patrons everything they ask for if the cost is too high. We don’t have to treat every new project as something that we can only do after we get our “real” work done. We don’t have to devote all of our instructional efforts to helping students navigate a system and an academic culture that they are allowed to belong to only so long as they pay tuition. They need to know practical stuff, but it is possible to connect what it takes to get through an assignment and the wider world of how information works. All of these seemingly implacable community needs are

created by human beings and the choices they make. Yes, there are huge systemic problems, but we need to recognize that we are more than servants to people who don't even know the systemic problems exist. We need to step up and defend our values even though they run counter to the current narrative of fear, scarcity, and competition. Also, it makes the job a lot more interesting.

- Make room for conversation. We have had, off and on, a journal club for our staff. We meet for breakfast at the campus dining center and talk about a reading one of us has selected. We typically spend no more than an hour, but in almost every case, we've left the cafeteria with plans to do neat things. By opening that hour up for nothing but ideas, we've reaped real benefits. We also have held an annual assessment retreat where we look at whatever observations we've gathered over the year about student learning, and it always results in concrete plans – and is fun, besides. It's bizarrely difficult to carve a few hours out of schedules, but it's worth it. These are some of the most rewarding hours we spend together.
- Have fun. Serious fun. We need to be playful with ideas because play is freeing, play is seditious, play is transformative. According to [Quentin Stevens](#), who studied the ways people use urban spaces and make them their own, “play contains utopian impulses. It is non-exploitative and non-hierarchical. Play is subversive of social order . . .” It's “characterized by multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradictions, the unpredictable and the unfamiliar” (24-5). It can help us break out of unexamined habits and raise questions that need to be raised.
- Do what you can and celebrate those small victories. Even little things matter. Writing a zine culture that offers a creative alternative to mainstream culture while refusing to over-simplify hard and complicated things, [Alison Piepmeier](#) refers to this work as “micropolitical pedagogies of hope,” ways in which small interventions and acts of resistance matter. They can show the way, they can start the work of resetting a culture.

We need to not only defend our values in a world that seems hostile to them, we need to offer hope that these values are possible. Guess what! We don't have to surrender privacy. We don't have to give up on the public good to serve our communities. We don't have to accept unequal access to knowledge. If we act on our values, even bit by bit, we can use our resources, skills, and convictions to help restore the intellectual and cultural commons. We can collectively build an alternative framework for the future. We need to have faith that another world is possible – because who else will make it happen if not us?

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