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Connecting Communities: Creating Meaning-Maker Spaces in Our Libraries
Barbara Fister, Library Technology Conference, Macalester College, March 20, 2014

I should probably start with a confession: I suspect I know less about technology than just about everybody in this room. I play. I putz. I try things out, but I'm not very skilled and the closest I've come to writing code is bumbling around in some very simple html. So forgive me if what I have to say this morning is not what you got caffeinated to hear. Especially when I say it's not about technology.

Yes, this conference is about technology, but the work you really do is about understanding ways people interact with each other and with people's ideas.

The way we think about what our purpose is shapes what we do. While I was getting ready for this talk, I took a random sample of library mission statements put the verbs used in them into a word cloud. I was a little startled to see "provide" loom large, the verb most likely to show up, with "support" "serve," and "provide" also appearing frequently.

These are mostly modest, unassuming verbs, eager to help, but reactive and patiently awaiting instruction.

I think we underestimate how much people care about libraries. Public libraries in the US are more common than Starbucks, and according to a Pew survey 95 percent of Americans think libraries are important to their communities. Universities, in a cost-cutting frenzy, have converted most of its academic staff to contingent labor – only a quarter of faculty today are in tenured or tenure-track positions, a complete reversal the three-quarters that it was in the late 1960s – and entire departments in the humanities and social sciences are threatened. But so far as I know, no university has closed its library, even though they could save a lot of money by doing so. We're essential, and we're well liked. What other social institution has that kind of public confidence and affection?

We can afford to be less modest. Our missions should mirror the value people see in libraries. Sometimes we've been a bit more grandiose. The authors of the Darien Statements took a leap and tried to address what is universal about libraries, declaring "the purpose of the Library is to preserve the integrity of civilization." When they described what that means, they used stronger verbs: empower, inspire, connect.

Our strong identification with providing globally-sourced information to our local communities has hobbled us in in many ways. Let me point to two trends since the 1990s that have played a role, one in public libraries, the other in academic institutions.

Public libraries are identified heavily with books – not that there's anything wrong with that. As a public library addict and an old-school book lover, I get nervous when anyone says "we're more than books" as if the books I seek don't matter and I'm tragically unhip for wanting them. There's something enduringly important about having a public commitment to sharing books.   Sharing books is a way of sharing ourselves, of demonstrating what we have in common. Books convey ideas, history, dreams, adventures, information that becomes important to us even if we didn't seek it out but encounter it while reading something just for fun. Books help us choose who we want to be, individually and collectively, and play a role in developing empathy, affirming identity, and expanding our view of the world.

But something went terribly wrong when libraries were told they should be more like bookstores – not quirky local bookstores, but giant chains. The 1998 *American Libraries* cover story that made this suggestion was written by a man who went on to become a vice president at a for-profit library management corporation which municipalities turn to when they want to outsource their libraries to a private company, especially handy when you want to lay off a unionized work force. He thought reference services were an unnecessary frill because there wasn't enough market demand; overeducated librarians could be replaced by low-wage workers because Barnes and Nobles didn't require their employees to have masters degrees and they did just fine, and we should quit this nonsense of building collections at the local level. We'd save so much money if acquisitions were handled in bulk by a head office somewhere else. That mentality was part of our zeitgeist, and it took root. We were encouraged to think of people who use libraries as "customers" and assumed retail store design had more value than our spaces because unlike us, retailers understood human behavior and are able to provide excellent customer service. We should have noticed that the iconography that Barnes and Nobles employed so effectively until they started to fall apart was drawn directly from libraries. Old-fashioned leather chairs, dark woodwork and names of authors inscribed along the ceiling appealed to people. So to be a better library, we had to take back from a retailer the iconography they got from us.

Now that Barnes and Nobles isn't doing so well, the newest thing in the headlines is the celebrated bookless library in Bexar County, Texas. It takes pride in looking like an Apple store, even down to having staff wear t-shirts and hoodies so they can look young and hip and relevant. But still – retail is the model.

Our discussions about public libraries and ebooks have been largely steered by the idea that we have to give our "customers" the ebooks they want to read, delivered to their devices of choice, or we risk becoming irrelevant. This gives Penguin Random House a perfect opportunity for extortion. It would sure be a shame if something happened to your relevance.

In the process we've rewritten Ranganathan's five laws of library science.

Mita Williams gave a talk at this conference, "The Origin of the Future is in the Present," which inspired me to try my hand at a non-consumerist version of the five laws.
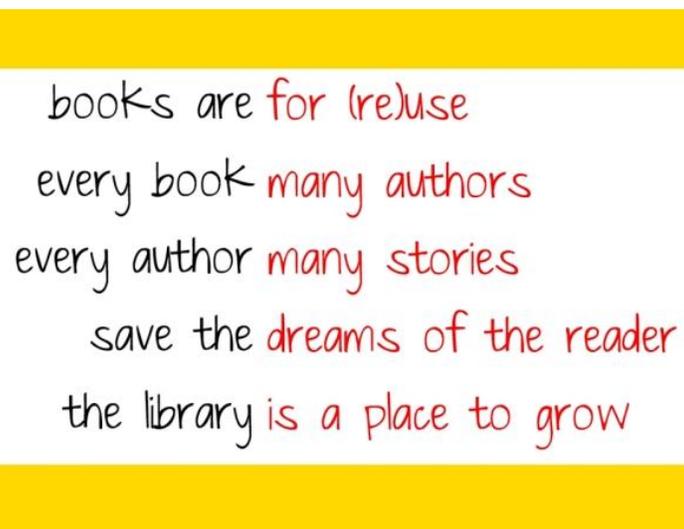
Academic librarians face a similar dilemma, though in some ways it's more stark. According to Ithaka S&R faculty surveys conducted every few years for over a decade, the most important function of the library has always been "to pay for the resources I need." The library's primary function, to support individual productivity, grew ever more important for faculty between 2003 and 2009. Interestingly, in

2012, it fell off a bit – oh noes! Relevance alert!! Are libraries losing market share now that we can haz pdf? Even with that drop off, paying for stuff was still believed the most important thing libraries did by far. A survey of library directors just released shows that they put student learning ahead of faculty wants. . Providing stuff is shrinking, too, along with our purchasing power, but it still makes the list of our top priorities.

So we buy stuff and we try to make it available as efficiently as Amazon and Google. This is not easy. We don't have their deep pockets and their investors, and we don't spy on people in order to "improve their search experience". Besides, they're massively global. We're local.

That purely local focus that we have cultivated, while it has value, is problematic. We struggle to buy stuff on behalf of our communities, but our mission can extend only to the city limits or to the community of current faculty and staff and those students who have paid their tuition bills on time. It seems really strange to work so hard to convince students scholarship matters, just to cut them off as soon as they are ready to go out into the world.

Not long ago, Cory Doctorow spoke about "GLAM and the Free World." He argues cultural institutions have a special role in shaping what our technological future will be. "We are presently building the electronic nervous system of the modern world . . . We dwellers on the electronic frontier have it on our power to establish the norms, laws and practices that will echo through the ages to come." If we let go of that power, if we put all of our efforts into accommodating corporate demands, if we don't propose an alternative, the world will suffer. The world needs our most grandiose values more than it needs our modest passive verbs of service and support.

We need to help people discover and connect to their chosen networks which are not likely local and, perhaps more importantly, we need to think about how to create a *free and fair infrastructure* for these networks, and the only way we will be able to do that is if we stop thinking of ourselves as providers of stuff to a narrowly-defined local community and get to work together to help people in our communities connect to the networks that matter to them. As Christine Pawley has said, we need to rethink our assumptions about providing information in consumerist terms and think instead of "individuals and groups of people actively shaping the world as knowledge producers in a way that renders the consumer-producer dichotomy irrelevant." We librarians need to work collectively to make this happen. We need to put our infrastructure and our efforts where our values are.

And you're just the people to do that.

As much as local support is valuable, we have to stop thinking that our missions extend only to the border, because our community member's don't recognize those borders. We need to stop being okay with cutting our students off the minute they graduate. We need to stop acting like local franchises for multinational corporations who feel it's their right to control the record of knowledge. I took it as a bad omen when the APA changed their citation rules, instructing authors to use DOIs in citations and, if there were no DOIs, find the publishers website and say that's where the article was retrieved even if it's a lie. The APA is a major publisher, so they feel the record of knowledge is accessed through them, not through libraries – and we've enabled that mass appropriation of our culture. Collectively, we need to find ways to not just to negotiate better terms of service for ourselves, but to provide an alternative to the market-driven philosophies that are distorting and corrupting our information ecosystem.

Let's look at the list of core values the ALA has compiled from various documents: We don't always live up to these values, but this is a pretty uncontroversial statement of what we say we care

about as a profession. Contrast that with another approach: "Library collections exist for one purpose only: to connect users to the information they need." This comes from a blog post by Rick Anderson. To be fair, he wasn't talking about everything libraries do, he was comparing the value of librarian-curated collections to patron-driven collection methods. But what he concluded is a commonly held belief, and we frequently make concessions so that we can provide access and service at the expense of our other values. Access for some takes priority over the public good every single day in our libraries. The amount of money and labor we invest in this terribly limited version of our values is staggering.

But it's the product of a world view that became ascendant in the 1980s – that people's behavior is guided by economic forces, that they operate as purely rational, competitive, and self-interested beings, and that the best way for societies to thrive is to assume market forces are pulling the levers that guide human affairs. Libraries have absorbed those lessons to a great degree. We've had to give up on our values in order to prove our value within the competitive framework of our institutions. Local collections are an outdated burden and a waste of valuable space. Knowledge and culture are not ours to preserve; it's digital intellectual property controlled by global enterprises. Within this framework, our faculty and local creative artists each is expected to be an entrepreneur who submits their work to these enterprises in hopes that they will be able to piece together a living in a competitive, precarious world. Why should faculty feel any loyalty to their local institution when so little loyalty is given to them?

This is why we need a new mindset, one that reimagines community in multiple dimensions, one that thinks about serving the world, not just our nearest neighbors.

Take Open Folklore as an example, a partnership between the American Folklore Society and the Indiana University Libraries. It's premised on the belief that folklore belongs to everyone, not just scholars. They put together a new economic model for sharing scholarship with the entire world that combines the already prodigious amount of donated labor scholars routinely provide with the skillset that librarians can offer. In contrast to the American Anthropological Association's claim that it costs them over $5,000 to publish an article, Jason Baird Jackson calculated publishing an article in *Museum Anthropology Review* cost roughly 42 cents. He calls it a "modest demonstration that another world is possible." These projects are useful prototypes. This year, *Cultural Anthropology,* the flagship journal of a section of the AAA, has gone open access, pulling out of the grip of Wiley Blackwell and turning to Duke libraries for technical support. The next issue of the journal will detail how exactly that transition happened. It's not something the other sections can do easily, because the association is locked into a contract with Wiley Blackwell that runs through 2017. (Now you know why it costs over $5,000 to publish an article!) But there is movement in the right direction.

Another open access project that I find inspiring is the WAC Clearinghouse, which publishes books and journals of interest to composition scholars who teach writing across the curriculum. This was started in 1991 on a shoestring and now has published over 50 books and seven journals and hosts a disciplinary database of research in the field. It relies on the labor and imagination of the WAC community and while they have come up with a succession plan for what will happen when its founder retires, they've never really bothered with a business plan. They just do it. Right now, they're planning to publish 25 new books in five years – for under fifty grand just to show what can be done. That's about ten percent of the cost of traditional book publishing. One of their books has been downloaded a quarter million times. Compare that to a similar book published the traditional way that might sell 500

copies. They are publishing books at one tenth the cost that can have five hundred times the reach. In this case there's no library involvement. It's just something a community of scholars wanted to do, and so they did.

I want to tell you a bit about the Lever Initiative, a collaborative project I've been involved with. Back in 2010, I sent an email to a group of liberal arts college library directors, all members of the Oberlin Group of 80 college libraries, suggesting that we might want to jointly investigate the possibility of starting an open access press. It turned out Bryn Geffert of Amherst College was composing a similar message at exactly the same time. We both believed that our libraries could contribute something imaginative to the open access movement that reflects our liberal arts perspective, our wish to bring knowledge to the world, and our conviction that even small schools like ours can make good things happen. So we formed a task force to explore the idea, passed the hat so that we could bring in Melinda Kenneway of TBI Communications as a consultant, and we're wrapping up the first stage just now. A final report from this stage will be available any day now.

We decided after much debate to call this project the Lever Initiative, referring to Archimede's claim that he could move the world given a place to stand and a lever. The goal is to explore "whether libraries collectively could launch a sustainable Open Access press to provide scholars editorial attention worthy of their best work in whatever form this might take – and offer it to the world." In this first exploratory phase, we held virtual workshops with library directors, conducted interviews with people who have interest in and knowledge of scholarly publishing, we surveying the landscape for open access book publishing, which has been exploding since we first started talking about it, and we surveyed faculty at our liberal arts colleges and more broadly. The next step, should we decide to go forward (and that's an open question) will be to explore what exactly we might do and how we would fund it.

I want to talk especially about the two faculty surveys we conducted. The first involved over 600 Oberlin Group college faculty. We then sent it out more broadly and gathered another 368 responses from beyond our colleges, a mix of faculty mostly working at 4-year through PhD-granting institutions, with a few community college faculty. Because the second group was a convenience sample that likely represents greater interest in open access publishing than normal, those results need to be taken with a grain of salt. But since liberal arts colleges represent such a small subset of higher education we wanted to reach out to a broader set of subjects. The findings were fairly consistent between groups, though our second sample was more dissatisfied with the status quo and more interested in open access options.

Faculty by and large seemed fairly satisfied with the quality of traditional scholarly book publishing in terms of selection, peer review, editing, and production, and feel well served by their libraries, with interlibrary loan playing a huge role in their satisfaction. So generally, they don't see a problem with gaining access to high quality books. They were not so happy with the time it took for a book to get published. They weren't satisfied with marketing and distribution efforts, and they were unhappy with high prices.

A majority of Oberlin Group faculty responding to the survey said they might consider publishing with an open access press. Over half of arts and humanities faculty said they would consider it. Only 9 percent said they wouldn't. That surprised me. There was even greater interest expressed by our non-Oberlin Group respondents.

What they wanted most from a new press had little to do with technology. They wanted editors who were more responsive and helpful. They wanted help reaching an audience. The quality of peer

review was important to them, and if they were going to choose an open access publisher, they wanted to see people and institutions involved with it who have strong reputations. Not so important to the majority were multimedia capabilities, alternative metrics, the ability to update texts or interact with readers, though some were very enthusiastic about those things. A large majority expressed some interest in short-form publishing, something between the length of an article and a traditional book. And as you might imagine, criteria for tenure and promotion was invoked frequently as a factor. As one respondent put it, "It's not publish or perish, except that it is totally that."

The open comments from respondents reflect the range of attitudes you might expect. One wrote, "I'm not convinced that scholarship isn't already open and accessible." If you're getting what you need, it's hard to see the problem – a downside of our role as local providers. A particularly grumpy respondent wrote "The faculty see through this ploy. Bring back the books [apparently referring to a library that sent books to a remote storage facility]. Do not use vanity presses, disguised as innovative online 'platforms,' to get rid of the organized content that provides the historical depth necessary for research in our libraries."

A small handful of similarly disgruntled commenters were particularly horrified by the idea of short form books. One wrote, "You need at least 200 pages to analyze an important topic in detail. I want my students for be able to follow complex arguments. Why cater to shorter attention spans among students?" But more respondents warmed to the idea, commenting that too many books are padded and that some good ideas can be conveyed more effectively in short form.

Overall, the comments were divided between caution (what would tenure committees think? Would the quality be high enough?) and quite a bit of enthusiasm, expressed in comments like these:

- "Anything open access immediately gets my attention -- I want my work to be read, not to just be a line on my vita."
- "When a viable open-access book publisher appears, I'll gladly send all of my manuscripts there."
- "Cost is the biggest issue. My book with an academic press costs ~$75, which means that no normal person will ever buy it."
- "I think Open Access is one of the most important issues of our moment in time. The changes in technology and publishers' responses (I'm talking about you, Elsevier) have created national and international haves and have nots. Information should be available to people who need it, not just to people who can pay for it. I am also tired of the "double taxation" involved in the current system: my university pays me to write up my research, then my university pays again (at times exorbitantly, to database providers and commercial publishers) for access to the work that the university paid me to write and which it supported with library and research funding. This is an unethical model and cannot be sustained."
- "I hope it happens."
- "Is it not obvious that we need this?"
- "Stop talking about it and do it."
- "Let's get started."

I can't predict at this point where we will go with this information, but whatever happens, it has been interesting to see such a groundswell of innovation in open access book publishing in the past two years and to get some insights into faculty perceptions, which were frankly more positive and informed than I anticipated, very much wanting traditional values to be respected, but wanting to do it in an open access environment.

Why would a librarian like me at a school with a tiny acquisitions budget want to spend some of it on a project like this? Because I believe in the transformative value of knowledge and because I believe that our students are not merely information consumers and degree seekers. They are people who are seeking their place in the great conversations that give this world meaning. We need to help them develop their voice and a sense that what they can do makes a difference.

Andromeda Yelton once wrote eloquently about why this matters. She was speaking about digital humanities at a time when the University of Virginia was in crisis. A group of political appointees to the Board of Visitors fired the president without warning, saying changes in technology and access to free educational content posed "an existential threat" to the university founded by Thomas Jefferson. "In other words," she said, "the explanation for this move framed democratizing technologies of access as a threat to the very existence of an institution of cultural memory, research, and higher learning." This seemed at the very least to be a complete misunderstanding of what higher education is about, and the "creative destruction" some board members espoused is based on market essentialism rather than on any vision of the common good. In the end, after mass protests, the president was reinstated. But Yelton described the work of the UVA scholars lab in terms I found inspiring.

> *We make things because that's how we understand. We make things because that's how we pass them on, and because everything we have was passed on to us as a made object. We make things . . . because that's how we interpret and conserve our inheritance. Because that's how we can make it all anew.*

This speaks to the ways communities fostered in libraries span past and present and link us together. As I said earlier, it's not about technology, it's about community – networks of community much larger than our local ones, ones spanning time and space.

I want to play a role in changing the current market-based assumptions we make about how ideas come into being and how they should be shared. If we act on our values, we can build an alternative framework for the future. It isn't about business models. It isn't about managing stuff. It's about people in communities sharing what they know. It's about using our resources, skills, and convictions to help restore the intellectual and cultural commons. Another world is, indeed, possible.