



7-1-2005

Life after the reference desk: Co-creating a digital age library


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Recommended Citation

Somerville, M. M., & Schader, B. (2005). Life after the reference desk: Co-creating a digital age library. *The Charleston Advisor*, 7(1), 56–57.

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together now (of course, there are some exceptions). Is there leadership that can bring us together effectively to reimagine ourselves in this way? What would such leadership look like? Are we at risk from always thinking too small? If the issues I have outlined do not persuade you that we think too small, then let me throw a few more onrushing asteroids into the field of vision.

- The explosion of content provision in a world of blogs, vlogs, podcasts, and the like. There is serious material there that needs to come inside the fence of intelligently managed and accessible information. These are the collections of the future, along with the about-to-be mass digitized library collections. What have we done to make them available?
- Two words: China and India. The universe of people who consume serious academic information is exploding right now, today. If we

think that a few hundred independently funded, academic libraries working separately and collaborating on small- to medium-scale projects are ready for this, we are, I have to say, nuts.

Let me remind us all again of the Lavoie/Schonfeld numbers and the breathtaking fact that half of our printed books are under 30 years old. We realize, on that scale and even with a limited sense of geometry, that the new half life of printed information will soon be 20 years and less. In other words, there is reason to think that the collections and content we will need to manage will more than double within our lifetimes and probably double twice or three times in the lifetimes of the very young. Growth of that scale cannot be managed by business as usual.

My friends, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Which one shall we take next? ■



▼ ADVISOR REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Life After the Reference Desk

Co-Creating a Digital Age Library

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Amidst converging and conflicting changes in academic universities, reference librarians at California Polytechnic State University (“Cal Poly”) in San Luis Obispo seized the opportunity to rethink and redesign their work. Employing systems thinking, knowledge creation, and information literacy principles and practices, they have reconsidered their roles and responsibilities so as to better align with university learning, teaching, and research priorities. Reference desk service and bibliographic instruction sessions that eighteen months earlier comprised their exclusive foci have been replaced with digital portal content development, integrated relational information literacy, curriculum-aligned digital and print collection development, and high-end physical and virtual research consultation. In addition, integral to their newly constituted learning community, librarians are responsible for contributing a special competence to the Information and Instructional Services (IIS) team’s knowledge base to ensure continuous individual and group learning.

The transformation process, now in its eighteenth month, has infused explicit information-focused learning into the workplace, thereby readying librarians for intellectual collaboration with academic faculty. This reorientation is in keeping with a national trend to move beyond “sitting at the reference desk,” satisfying “mediated search” gatekeeper roles, and delivering bibliographic instruction “50 minute stand” lectures. In the Cal Poly case, this first hand reintroduction to inquiry-based collaborative learning also prepares long time reference librarians to move out from behind the desk and collaboratively co-invent physical and virtual Learning Commons with campus stakeholders.

Here we sketch the journey of Information and Instructional Services (IIS) group members in generic terms transferable to other academic libraries seeking deep transformative changes better aligned with the digital age. Our concluding remarks illustrate how organizational reputa-

posing and retooling can position public service staff members - librarians as well as paraprofessionals - to contribute in new ways to 21st Century Digital Age knowledge management and knowledge integration initiatives.

It’s Always Been That Way

For as long as anyone could remember, public services librarians at Cal Poly sat at the desk answering questions. For at least the last two decades, this occupational priority was supplemented by didactic teaching; students sat and librarians spoke upon request from academic faculty to impart “information competence” proficiencies. A count of reference desk transactions and instructional sessions were routinely collected and reported to the Chancellor’s Office for the California State University (CSU) System, in which Cal Poly serves as one of 23 campuses. No use was made of these numbers locally nor was the quality of information and instructional services evaluated. Annual staff performance reviews were largely anecdotal in nature; neither performance plans nor assessment criteria guided the personnel appraisal process. Professional development was occasional and at will with no anticipation for reporting out to colleagues. Although there was some seasonal variation in the pace of activities, with more traffic in the fall when the school year began and less activity in the spring as thoughts turned to summer vacation plans, a pervasive malaise characterized the workplace.

Within this staid environment, periodic announcements of another budget cut interrupted workplace calm. Over time, consistent erosion of the budget served to convert retirements into “salary savings” through permanently eliminating lines that, if filled, would further jeopardize the materials’ budget. Shortly after a new head of IIS was hired in September 2003, a permanent 10.75 percent reduction in the annual base budget was announced, which precipitated organization wide recog-

dition that another 3.5 public service positions must remain unfilled. This development accelerated the new group leader's "appreciative inquiry" into service priorities in Information and Instructional Services. Signature programs—the Reference Desk and the Learning Resources Center—earned particularly thorough examination because these departments' salary lines accounted for 25 percent of the annual library budget.

Program reviews produced heretofore unrecognized revelations. Reference transaction analysis demonstrated that desk activity consisted largely of directional questions, which could be best addressed by improved signage. Informational questions were primarily assignment driven—i.e., few high-end professional-level research queries were presented. Concurrent review of the second service, the Learning Resources Center, revealed that over time this model "library within a library" collection, begun two decades earlier to serve the teacher education program, had become woefully out of date and unaligned with California State educational standards. Within the context of the budget crisis, these insights permitted—and, in fact, required—that IIS group members reconsider service priorities and rethink staffing patterns and working relationships.

Rethinking, Repurposing, and Retooling

Ill equipped to maintain current services and averse to layoffs, library staff recognized the inevitability of reconsidering core services, repurposing the organization, and retooling library staff expertise. This in turn required a change in how professional and paraprofessional staff thought and what they thought about. Drawing from Scandinavian-style participatory design practices, introduced by Luleå University of Technology social informatics professor Dr. Anita Mirijamdotter, "parts mentality" was replaced over time by systems thinking that holistically contextualizes decision making. This intellectual framework provided the foundation for building a sustainable learning culture predicated on another Swedish tradition: group consensus making, whereby individuals inform and educate one another for the explicit purpose of creating common ideas and ideals. Through ongoing practice, explicit information sharing processes aimed at furthering common understanding and group learning were embedded in the organizational culture. While these Scandinavian workplace practices are certainly transferable to any contemporary information organization, their social democratic origins were particularly agreeable to the strong labor union presence in the Cal Poly library.

To reorient and realign the work of Information and Instructional Services personnel, Mirijamdotter facilitated implementation of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) processes, an organizational change strategy developed in Europe over the past thirty years by Dr. Peter Checkland (1999). Primarily used by consultants for one-time organizational interventions, SSM thinking tools have now been integrated into ongoing library systems and services redesign efforts at Cal Poly. As a result of thinking together, reference librarians have been replaced at the desk by paraprofessional staff from public and technical services. Now former reference librarians apply their information and communication technology (ICT) literacy capabilities to content creation for disciplinary digital research portals seamlessly integrated into course curricula (Somerville and Vuotto, 2005). In addition, librarians' collection development responsibilities have been extended well beyond tending the reference collection. As knowledge managers, they oversee disciplinary print and electronic acquisitions, including working on digital asset management issues with technical services colleagues. Traditional boundaries between technical and public services have been replaced by active and ongoing collaboration to advance digital migration and resource access. Finally, an annual professional development

plans, with measurable outcomes aligned to the library's strategic plan, now guide former reference librarians' work priorities.

The new organizational learning culture also prepares librarians to apply their burgeoning knowledge management expertise to coinvent a collaborative interdisciplinary physical and virtual Learning Commons. With academic faculty whose projects will populate the Commons, librarians are cocreating instructional strategies for embedding information, communication, and technology literacy. Some knowledge managers have begun to coauthor grant proposals with college faculty, serving as coinvestigators. Others have initiated elbow-to-elbow research laboratory partnerships with undergraduate science faculty and students.

Meanwhile, the reference desk is staffed by the paraprofessionals formerly assigned to the Learning Resources Center, in partnership with technical services paraprofessionals (Somerville, Huston, and Mirijamdotter 2005). They are supported by the professional knowledge managers who provide annotated course assignments, now required when library instruction requests are booked, and which become archived in an assignment database. In addition, weekly educational sessions delivered by former reference librarians address "difficult reference questions," a staff development strategy that will advance paraprofessional expertise incrementally over time (Mirijamdotter and Somerville 2005). This first contact staffing model frees public services professionals to engage in high-end research consultation, digital knowledge integration, and curriculum integrated instruction.

Results to date suggest that application of a systems thinking approach (Somerville and Mirijamdotter 2005) to reference desk transformation ensures greater productivity, as well as enrichment, for both librarians and support staff. When embedded into organizational culture, holistic thinking also promotes strategic alignment of library activities with the university's core research, teaching, and outreach mission. Current efforts focus on designing interactive evaluation processes that assess the efficacy of this systems approach, which emphasizes enhanced collections, collaborative initiatives, digital migration, knowledge integration, and embedded instruction, in the Learning Commons "under construction." ■

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