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Rethinking Libraries in Terms of Learning and Working Collaboratively: An Interview with Mary Somerville

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Editors of *Collaborative Librarianship* (CL) recently sat down with Dr. Somerville to explore aspects of her fascinating new book, *Working Together: Collaborative Information Practices for Organizational Learning* (Chicago: ACRL, 2009), that deal with collaboration and rethinking the purpose and structures of the academic library. CL welcomes your response to any part of this interview. A critical review of this book will be in an upcoming issue of *Collaborative Librarianship*.

CL: You have titled your book, *Working Together: Collaborative Information Practices for Organizational Learning*. How would you, if in fact you would, define “collaboration”?

MS: I don’t define collaboration in the book. Rather, I illustrate its evolution through projects and systems that incrementally build capacity and further sustainability. Were I to offer a definition, I would suggest that collaboration involves inviting the ideas and talents of others into decision making and action taking. It requires appreciating the value of a wide range of knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve a common good. I must emphasize one key point. More than trying to solve some specific problem plaguing academic libraries, in the book I tell stories designed to help library staff at all levels to be encouraged and inspired to think more broadly, to think differently about their work, and to appreciate the amazing potentials of their jobs, their library, their institution.

CL: More specifically, what do you mean by “organizational learning” and how does this relate to the mission and operations of libraries?

MS: The book suggests that “information-in-context” encounters provoke a re-examination of current understanding and prior learning. Through this “sense making” activity, individu-

als derive new understanding – in other words, they learn. When workplace environments support collective “sense making,” they enable knowledge creation through encouraging collective re-examination and reflection. How does this relate to the mission and operation of libraries? Well, libraries’ missions involve providing information for the pursuit of further understanding, including the production of knowledge – though we typically do not employ information strategically to continuously improve our own library operations. Generally, for instance, we do not cultivate and employ the information literacy capabilities within ourselves that we foster in others – framing questions, selecting sources, evaluating perspectives, and presenting interpretations to educate and inform.

In writing the book, I draw on the insights of Dr. Christine Bruce, Professor, Faculty of Information Technology, Queensland University of Technology, who explores ways to more effectively use information in the workplace and within an organization for the purpose of fostering learning and collaboration. As well, Dr. Anita Mirijamdotter at Luleå University of Technology (now Professor of Informatics in the School of Computer Science, Physics and Mathematics at Linnaeus University) in Sweden has done interesting research on creating workplace learning experiences that relate to “real world” systems design situations. And Professor Ikujiro Nonaka, author of the widely influential book, *The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation*, influences my work on rethinking and redesigning the academic library environment. The insights of these leading theorists inform the focus of the book, as stated in the subtitle: “collaborative information practices for

organizational learning.” Simply put, the challenge is for librarians to exploit for themselves what they value for others, namely, information literacy practices that unleash the power of knowledge, creativity and innovation.

CL: Recent budget reductions have forced many librarians to reconsider spending on collections, such as eliminating duplication of print and online resources. What would you best advise the profession when it comes to staffing? What are some of the initial key steps in your call for “repurposing” and “retooling” (p. 3)?

MS: Amidst escalating user expectations, libraries must clarify their core mission. The models that I propose are invitations for staff to participate in the process of reexamining work purposes and activities. Outcomes intend to rejuvenate and repurpose the people and functions within the academic library. Realization of this potential requires library leaders to ensure that employees are engaged in work producing strategic organizational outcomes. Throughout, professional development and staff training must enable successful assumption of new duties and development of requisite competencies.

In addition, workplace “dialogue and reflection” is essential. It ensures conversance with the role of the library within the university, in support of research, learning, and teaching, as well as understanding how each unit (and each person within each unit) contributes to outcomes. For example, in the case of the technical services department at the Auraria Library in Denver, Colorado, an “electronic resources life cycle model” was collaboratively created to provide a holistic “big picture” understanding of the work performed within the department. Then an appreciative inquiry approach was used to discover staff aspirations, including future contributions, which informed renegotiation of assignments in line with staff interests and abilities and dreams.

Essentially, the aim of repurposing and retooling is to invite staff to identify and to clarify their passions and aspirations as employees in the library, and to develop plans and strategies for moving forward into a future informed by environmental scans and best practices. The

process is not merely a “conversation” but rather an understanding and realignment of our individual and collective “intentionalities” within the workplace. It is a process of dialogue and reflection that leads to concrete change and action.

CL: How does one go about creating an inclusive workplace environment that encourages participatory decision making and workplace relationships that are more egalitarian?

MS: Start where you are. In my experience, the key is to discover “openings” for convening the conversations that catalyze organizational inquiry. At California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, this occurred when a permanent reduction of the budget coincided with the hiring of a new Assistant Dean for Public Services. At the Auraria Library, my start as University Librarian occurred simultaneous with the University’s requirement that all units produce a strategic plan in preparation for an upcoming accreditation visit. With precious few months to complete the plan, I employed “appreciative inquiry” in order to explore employees’ strengths, accomplishments, and aspirations. These one-on-one conversations provided me with deep insights into my colleagues’ motivation and goals; similarly, these conversations provided them with insights into my leadership style. To be truly effective, such an initiative requires significant support from high level administrators. In the case of Auraria Library, library leaders now continually employ appreciate inquiry – which avoids “deficit language” – in their interactions with co-workers.

Creation of an inclusive workplace environment also requires champions for new processes throughout the organization, across all horizontal sectors and vertical levels, to ensure widespread engagement and adoption. Change grows as “knowledge advocates” influence others as “thought leaders,” “culture shapers,” and “boundary spanners.” Inquiry must be built into the day-to-day culture of the organization, including formal meeting venues (such as the Shared Leadership Team and Open Forum at the Auraria Library) and informal task force and committee deliberations. Technology-based systems must also provide easy access to the out-

comes of these face-to-face occasions for “dialogue and reflection” so that collective knowledge routinely informs decision making and action taking.

CL: Chapter Three, “Faculty Co-Design Partnership,” focuses on the design and creation of “digital research portals.” Does the activity of creating knowledge portals perpetuate the traditional notion of librarians as gate keepers or can it enable a new professional paradigm?

MS: This approach to creating research portals applies the work of Australian theorist Christine Bruce, as presented in her most recent book *Informed Learning*. Her research supports the notion that knowledge held by professionals and paraprofessional staff can, and should, enhance collective workplace information literacy. Furthermore, outcomes should promote the library’s strategic priorities. In this instance, the two-fold goal was to advance pre-professional disciplinary mastery and requisite information literacy competencies. The creation of the portal occurred as subject specialists in the library and in the classroom shared their knowledge and expertise, learned from each other, and together designed this research tool to accommodate a variety of user constituencies’ needs. This type of research portal is designed to replace the “one-off” 50-minute bibliographic instruction session; instead research competencies are seamlessly integrated into faculty teaching and student learning. The use of digital technology also permits extension of the library’s instructional reach to many more clientele, anytime, anyplace.

In *Working Together*, the knowledge portal project was designed and developed *with and for* business students and faculty. From the start, the portal was intended to be fully integrated into course curriculum. So faculty and librarians co-designed the marketing curriculum and the research portal together. Following this, continuous improvement was ensured by the librarian’s ongoing solicitation of feed-back from student and faculty users. The business librarian continues to incorporate changes based on assessment results as well as anecdotal evidence, with the aim to increase learning that both advances research competence and disciplinary

mastery. In this way, the portal represents the antithesis of the traditional “gate keeper” model.

CL: In chapter four, “Learning Commons Synergies,” you speak of the need for academic libraries to repurpose physical space. In some instances, it seems that public libraries are far ahead of the academe in creating space for cultural events, job retraining, lecture series, and other community events. If in fact public libraries tend to be ahead, what can academic libraries learn from them?

MS: I would agree that in many instances public libraries have more readily and more effectively repurposed library space and services to meet changing user needs and expectations. I learned this during the time that I was associated with the Dr. Martin Luther King Library in San José, California. This joint public-academic library employed a public library-inspired approach to facilities utilization. The architect anticipated campus and community needs for meeting rooms, cultural events, diverse programming, and even literacy programs. The organization also employed the public library notion of “merchandising” books – as is done in “Barnes & Noble”-type book stores – to display new books and media. Academic librarians can learn from these innovations.

Rethinking and repurposing applies not only to space and service issues, but to a whole range of library resource and systems matters. At one time I was involved in a project to explore the development of an information sharing and knowledge creation system, one that served both academic and public library clientele. From the start, project planners exhibited remarkable intentionality, creativity, and good will in collaboratively envisioning design elements of for “boundary spanning” communication. Ultimately the project was not implemented for reasons outside the project itself, but it was exciting to see how staff from both the public and academic sectors brilliantly thought through the issues and demonstrated the will and capability to reach beyond their traditional boundaries.

My book seeks to promote this type of approach within libraries and other information and

knowledge organizations. I provide examples which demonstrate 'proof of concept' for organizational redesign efforts which engage employees in re-imagining resource usage and service delivery -- including envisioning how things can be done differently and better, anticipating how existing human and financial resources can be repurposed, and considering how employees' learning and insights can be better harnessed.

CL: At one point in the book you refer to how staff members of the RISE project,* mainly staff from technical services, "appreciably enhanced reference service quality." (p. 48). On a larger scale, how are the divides overcome where they exist between library departments, or more importantly between librarians and their paraprofessional colleagues? (*RISE - Research, Information Services and Education - was a reference desk pilot project that ostensibly redeployed para-professionals for reference service.)

MS: Let me begin by telling a story. In a technical services department, two staff members were for years responsible for checking in periodicals, one covering A through K and the other L through Z. When the more recently hired of the two began employment, her co-worker refused to train her. This behavior produced considerable ill will. Years later, after the two employees had participated for several months in the reference desk pilot project, they both came to realize that, ultimately, their work involved advancing learning -- not serials check in. Interactions with users of library materials at the public desk generated their shared appreciation for a "big picture" understanding of the library mission and their organizational roles. This ignited commitment to contribute substantively to the university's teaching, learning, and research priorities. In fact, these staff members subsequently worked together to create a whole new approach to periodicals management: they recommended discontinuance of single issue check-in so their efforts could be applied to more "impactful" activities. This story illustrates that enriched context can advance workplace changes.

The RISE project was one that arose from this new ethos in the library. The silo model of li-

brary operations was overcome by refocusing the energies and expertise of library staff on envisioning and creating new systems of knowledge management enabled by new technology applications. Staff members were given meaningful supportive roles and librarians were able to participate more directly in the teaching/learning enterprise of the university. The whole system, it should be stressed, was built on mutual trust and respect among all professional and paraprofessional staff.

CL: You recast the academic library as a "knowledge enabling" environment (p. 69). The idea of "enabling" -- as it emerges in your book -- has many dimensions. In fact it may be difficult for a library to transform itself into a truly enabling environment. What do you perceive are, or might be, the biggest barriers in bringing about this type of organizational change in libraries?

MS: Information hoarding produces silos, as illustrated in the case of the former system of periodicals check-in with the A-K and L-Z divisions. However, by focusing on staff aspirations and organizational potentials and then negotiating assignments and rewarding accomplishments based on interests and outcomes, workplace cultures can change. Sustainable change is most likely when intentional systems for explicit communication, decision making, and planning encourage information sharing and knowledge creation. In the RISE example, the paraprofessionals co-designed a decision support system which stored course assignments with annotated coaching notes provided by librarian instructors. Staff success was also furthered by regular training sessions provided by librarians on topics designated by staff. This combination of face-to-face and technology enabled information sharing promoted workplace learning and enriched collective knowledge.

These examples underscore the importance of redeploying the human and fiscal resources typically managed by library administrators. These leaders' resource allocation decisions, therefore, either advance or discourage movement toward a knowledge-enabling organization. Ideally, leaders create opportunities for staff to reflect on their work, to think analytically about what they

do, and to create new ways of doing things. As well, staff need to learn from each other in meaningful, transformative ways. This leadership approach reflects a significant departure from more traditional “top-down” management styles.

CL: How do libraries move from a quantitative approach to assessment (counting stuff) to a qualitative approach? (p. 71) How might a qualitative approach play out in institutions so committed to scientific, non-qualitative approaches to research and learning?

MS: A qualitative approach linked to workplace learning can bring about recognizable differences in collective capacity to express information literacy fundamentals – e.g., framing questions, selecting sources, evaluating perspectives, interpreting content, presenting results -- and so the approach can actually recommend itself in academic libraries. In *Working Together*, I provide examples of the staff learning which accrued from implementation of Soft Systems Methodology (that I’ll mention again later). Developed at the University of Lancaster by Dr. Peter Checkland, this investigatory approach employs highly qualitative methods to further the intrinsically social nature of learning through valuing multiple stakeholder perspectives and acknowledging human design capacity. Realization of these potentials requires asking some highly situated information-intensive questions, such as, “Are the right people at the table?” “Are we communicating in a way to bring about meaningful continuous improvements?” “Are we inviting into the process the participants needed for this type of change and development?” When well orchestrated, these lines of inquiry can cultivate and elevate collaborative information practices.

CL: Your book asserts that the librarian-teaching faculty partnership is key to the new model(s) you propose. But how does a librarian, or a library director, deal with the challenge of getting teaching faculty to partner with librarians?

MS: Bringing about this new partnership begins with revisioning the professional expertise of librarians. Actually, in my experience, it is more

challenging to get librarians to see themselves as effective partners with teaching faculty than getting teaching faculty to seek partnerships with librarians. For instance, librarians are often very comfortable with and overly committed to the “50 minute stand” bibliographic instruction session. So it requires considerable rethinking on their part to newly appreciate their expertise as collaborators with faculty in the teaching/learning enterprise. This requires that librarians go beyond the walls of the library into the teaching departments of the university. It involves a new focus on the activities of teaching and learning, moving away from the traditional focus on the artifacts and repositories of knowledge. When librarians become more fully engaged in the excitement of learning, this transformation is more easily realized.

CL: How does this re-conceptualization of libraries as partners in the learning enterprise translate for different types of non-academic libraries?

MS: The theoretical framework for the book evolves from studies in both academic and non-academic organizations, and from industries outside academe. For instance, Ikujiro Nonaka’s knowledge creation theory arises from studies in industry. Christine Bruce’s findings have been corroborated in the fields of accounting, the bakery industry, and the legal profession. So, independent of enterprise, the keys to success remain understanding and applying “appreciative inquiry” and collaborative design grounded in the social nature of learning and intended to promote structures for human inquiry and learning. Therefore, the potential exists for application of this approach to all types of human organizations, including all types of libraries.

CL: Throughout the book you provide some detailed and rather elaborate models and schemata, such as the “Process Model” shown on page 51, that reflect the new elements, dynamics and interrelations needed for organizational learning. How do you envision a library’s leadership team and staff members actually making use of these models?

MS: In the book, I present processes of inquiry-based learning that produce workplace collabo-

ration. Such environments must have explicit, purposeful structures and processes. The models intend to guide leaders' appreciation for the nuanced elements, as well as the operational outcomes, of human-based organizational processes. The Soft Systems Methodology, being one presented in the book, was selected in the Cal Poly implementation because it intentionally creates a relational context that encourages participants to recognize their workplace expertise which, if shared, advances group understanding. It is a system that is flexible, process oriented, and designed to enhance human interrelatedness. Because SSM has been shown to be effective in multiple industries around the world, its reputation also enhances staff receptivity and, ultimately, adoption.

More generally, I think that visual models that diagram work processes can reduce ambiguity by illustrating complexity. Especially within a culture of emergent "reflection and dialogue," drawings can reveal assumptions, permit comparisons, and inform discussions that produce new insights and shared understanding. In this way, models promote more robust and effective workplace environments.

CL: Is there a time frame specified for implementing this type of organizational transformation model in the workplace?

MS: The time frame for adoption and implementation is not linear, but rather very organic. It depends on the local situation. More important than the time frame is the identification and development of thought leaders in the library — those persons who are cross-boundary in their scope of thinking, those who help create the environment for new and expansive synergies to happen. Implementing the model also requires incredible patience and persistence. Having a clear vision of the "ideal future" is very important as well. Ideally, too, implementation occurs within an ever expanding circle of shared leadership.

CL: It seems that your new vision for academic libraries calls for a transformation not only of the library but the whole institution. What chance does a library have of affecting a transformation of the type you envision if there is

little or no impetus for an institutional-wide transformation?

MS: The transformation of academic institutions is already well underway. It is being expressed in the transformation from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach, a transformation from solely program related to lifelong learning. Given this major shift, it behooves academic libraries to also transform their roles from gatekeeper to guide or coach or facilitator or perhaps "co-journeyer" in the learning process -- one who actively engages in shaping the evolving peer-review process, one who adjusts learning processes to better meet user needs and expectations, one who co-creates knowledge and knowledge management systems *with and for* beneficiaries.

CL: What might be some of the consequences, in your opinion, if libraries do not engage in changing at a fundamental, organizational level?

MS: I would prefer to reframe the question as one that assumes the issue is not problem solving but rather one that promotes possibility thinking. As such, the question centers not on warnings and dire consequences, but rather on creative possibilities for the future. It is a question of unleashing staff potential to express more fully their aspirations and capabilities in a collaboratively redesigned workplace environment. The book offers an approach for reconsidering fundamental organizational assumptions and envisioning new structures and processes that ensure more effective information sharing and knowledge creation, thereby producing more meaningful work for all library employees.