2015

Intentional Synergy: The New Librarian as Co-Learner

Christopher Lawton
Old Dominion University, christopher.d.lawton@gmail.com

TITLE:

Intentional Synergy:

The New Librarian as Co-Learner.

ABSTRACT:

Questions abound regarding the changing fate of libraries, and librarians, too, must reconsider their role. New Librarians increasingly find themselves serving not just as human information retrieval systems, but as "safari guides," leading the curious through an information ecosystem growing explosively. Gone are the days of inscrutable librarians definitively announcing that they had provided all available information on a topic. Today, New Librarians need to cultivate a toolkit of skills and roles surrounding learning and inquiry, parsing new ideas quickly, challenging assumptions, and guiding their communities through the information ecosystem. As a partner, not a service provider, New Librarians shine.

Introduction

Librarians around the world are constantly asked to reevaluate the roles they play in the information ecosystem. Traditional views of librarianship often cast librarians as inscrutable, slightly dusty figures who proclaim from their desks that they have uncovered hitherto-unseen lore that solves great mysteries. Perhaps less overblown, other descriptions might mention the school librarian who fostered early traditional literacy, the public librarian that fought for patron privacy, or (heaven forbid) "the lovely bookish one who likes cats." While recent developments have challenged notions of the librarian stereotype, even many librarians may find they try to innovate within a fairly traditional structure, leading their communities to the best possible information. This chapter advocates for a slightly different approach, introducing three roles for

librarians that rest upon a foundation of co-learning, the assumption that information can flow in more than one direction, even within a traditional structure of "teacher" and "learner".

The three roles may not sound new or particularly groundbreaking, and in fact many librarians are probably already doing many of the things suggested. Rather, understanding these roles in the context of co-learning can help position the librarian to act more intentionally. These roles encompass three very different approaches to problem spaces, and librarians may find that by having vocabulary to describe the actions they're already taking, they can "switch hats" more easily, applying a particular skillset to a specific problem.

The three roles are described as separate entities, and librarians can certainly choose to focus on just one role at a time; however, librarians may find that they are most effective when striking a balance between two roles, or even bringing aspects of all three to bear on a particular problem. Roles may come into play for brief moments, or for a much longer period, depending on the needs of the librarian's community.

In brief, the three roles are to parse new information quickly, to ask challenging questions, and to provide order in chaos. What follows is a description in detail of each role; an introduction to co-learning, the foundation of the three roles; and narrative scenarios that illustrate the roles in practice.

Three Roles

Librarians as Orienteers: Information Parsing

Librarians are constantly learning, and that trait is most obvious when librarians act in the first role; the rapid parsing of information, even in unfamiliar fields. Orienteer-librarians readily

absorb information from the clients with whom they work, and can immediately put that information to good use for the project at hand (and into the future). Beyond any information gained from the community members they serve, orienteer-librarians constantly keep their mind and their eyes open, absorbing information and connecting it to the network of sources they already have. Orienteer librarians excel at drawing connections between seemingly-unrelated sources, and sharing those connections with others. In essence, they can "draw maps" to link alien concepts together; for example, engineers trying to make a net to keep robotics components together might be pointed toward resources on knitting with monofilament.

Librarians in the orienteer role soak up information in any context, from traditional research to casual conversations with friends and colleagues. While not quite hypervigilance, with all its concomitant overtones of stress, orienteer-librarians are constantly paying attention to small details. Their observations are linked to the existing worldview they can then use in their other roles.

In order to establish themselves quickly, orienteer-librarians develop keens skills to identify information they lack, and are then able to fill those gaps. Identifying information needs is one of the keys to information literacy, and orienteer-librarians exemplify that skillset. In this role, librarians are "always on"--paying close attention to the information environment in which they exist regardless of the task at hand. In a nutshell, these orienteer-librarians never know what information may be needed eventually, so they take note of it all.

By being strongly observant, discerning missing information and finding it, and connecting disparate pieces of their information environment, librarians take on the role of orienteer. In that role they establish themselves as useful sources of information for their community, even if the librarian is a relative newcomer to that community.

Librarians as Disrupters: Dynamic Questioning

Disrupter-librarians see their role as re-framing information threads. “Shaking things up” becomes a big part of what librarians can do--but they do it in productive ways. By getting to know their communities and knowing what questions to ask, they can help people think differently about the information they’re using. In this sense, librarians in a disrupter role agitate and advocate for positive change and the consideration of issues from all angles.

Librarians in public-facing positions may find that the foundation of this disrupter-librarian role is familiar; helping community members and library clients find the best possible information by adjusting questions, search queries, and result sets to produce the key resources people need. Disrupter-librarians take things a bit farther, in the sense that they may suggest wildly different approaches to a problem instead of minor adjustments. Disrupter-librarians use a host of approaches guided by their training and intuition to help their community think differently.

Where many librarians know how to conduct interviews, the questions often boil down to a theme-and-variations on “Tell me what you need.” Yes, some librarians can tease out an amazing level of detail about the resources their clients are seeking, and this is helpful; however, disrupter-librarians try something else. Rather than the transactional approach of “tell me what you need,” disrupter-librarians instead ask, “how can we think about this differently?” positioning themselves as collaborators and change agents. Especially for librarians who work outside the traditional structure of a library, this disrupting approach relies heavily on a close partnership with the community members facing the problem.

Disrupter-librarians attempt to problem-solve with outside-the-box thinking, bringing diverse perspectives together into one unified whole. More than that, disrupter-librarians attempt to share their vision and approach with their clients. They may be brought in when everything is going well, but it's far more likely that disrupter-librarians will be asked to kick-start a new workflow in a stalled project. In that case, the role of disrupter-librarian may be seen in conflict with that of orienteer-librarian. Where orienteer librarians often succeed by quickly acclimating themselves to a new problem, disrupter librarians often use "fresh eyes" to their advantage; where experienced practitioners might have a clear sense of what "isn't done" in a field, disrupter-librarians leverage their inexperience in a positive way. Because they don't know what rules they might be breaking, disrupter-librarians can often solve seemingly-impossible problems.

All told, the role of disrupter-librarian balances with that of orienteer-librarian to create an individual who uses their knowledge to feel comfortable in nearly any field while simultaneously challenging members of that discipline to think in innovative ways. Librarians, then, might find themselves "switching hats" between the two roles many times for the same problem, but balancing these two skills in order to bring out a positive resolution.

Librarians as Pilots: Project Management & Information Organization

In dangerous seas throughout the world, ship captains can tap into local experience in the shape of a pilot--a knowledgeable seafarer who is intimately familiar with the hazards of the journey. Across the ocean of information, new librarians take a very similar role. Community members may be comfortable with the practice of research, or of information organization, but chances are good that librarians will have a relaxed familiarity with those skills that stems from years of regular practice.

Pilot-librarians fill a role on project teams that allows them to use their skills to full effect. Just as maritime pilots use their knowledge to interpret the physical environment and guide good decisions, pilot-librarians interpret the information environment, shedding light on search results, the greater project environment, and even on the meta-process. Pilot librarians often have a background in project management, and they use THOSE skills just as much if not more than the skills they have built in dealing with information.

Librarianship cannot happen in a vacuum, and this holds most true for the pilot-librarian. Pilot librarians are hypervigilant to the context of the information work their team and community strives to complete. They watch for hazards, pointing them out and steering their team away from them. Pilot librarians should be able to establish themselves in a team quickly, whether they are a founding member of that team or a recent addition.

This "pilotage" is also one of the best places for librarians to share their subject expertise. Certainly, librarians add value with their expertise in information seeking and information organization, but librarians who have subject-specific knowledge on top of their domain experience are an even greater asset to project teams and wider communities. Even without subject-specific knowledge, however, librarians fall into "pilot" roles on a regular basis. Public-facing librarians are called on to guide people through the information landscape in each interaction they face, whether it's a quick directional question or a lengthier "reference" interaction. Librarians are seen as guiding the "captains" in these situations, and by tapping into a sense of pilotage they can contextualize their role moving forward.

The Underpinning: Co-Learning

All three roles for new librarians--orienteering, disrupting, and piloting--build on a basic principle: that the members of the communities librarians serve bring valuable things to the table. Learning is not a one-way street. Co-learning, collaborative learning, describes an attitude and a behavior pattern that seeks to redefine the traditional roles of "teacher" and "student".[i] Instead of this binary, deterministic view, co-learners recognize that traditional "students" can still teach, and traditional "teachers" have plenty to learn[ii]. Building relationships involving a level of closeness that might be rare otherwise becomes important, and allows each party to succeed and grow from the encounter[iii].

One approach to co-learning emphasizes specific roles played by members of a group[iv]. Though librarians may take on particular roles, it's important to remember that these roles are flexible, and may be changed over time. If the goal of co-learning is to maximize synergistic relationships[v], librarians need to be able to adjust their approach to take the greatest advantage of those relationships. Librarians' communities are creating and disseminating information rapidly, with multiple technologies enabling this trend[vi], and librarians are positioned to intervene in positive ways to support problem solving and inquiry.

Learning from the communities they're serving is certainly the watchword for the orienteer-librarian. Yes, librarians have the skills to establish themselves without much support. Typically, librarians can enmesh themselves in the currents of information they need, but what better resource than people already involved in the field? By trusting their communities as information sources, librarians can lessen the task of orienting themselves to a new field. Librarians amplify knowledge work across disciplines, and it's likely that librarians will face

novel situations multiple times throughout their careers. By returning to a foundation of co-learning, librarians can build relationships and orient themselves quickly.

The disrupter-librarian seeks to challenge established thought patterns, and taking a co-learning approach to community interactions can help librarians in that mission. Because co-learners strive to build knowledge together, the disrupter-librarian is neither seen as a gatekeeper or as a novice. Though the disrupter-librarian challenges the status quo, ideally they do so to generate new knowledge. Even something so simple as asking a colleague to restate a problem domain in new terms can cause new patterns to emerge, can cause people to think differently. By approaching challenges with an eye to "learning [to face them] together", librarians can catalyze conversations across disciplines, and amplify diverse perspectives.

Pilot-librarians use their skills to lead. In communities less familiar with information work, librarians are called upon to shed light on new ways of finding and organizing information. Even when librarians' colleagues are adept at working with information, librarians have subject expertise that is valuable to share. Co-learning is indeed a two-way street, and pilot-librarians will often find themselves monitoring their team, facilitating knowledge creation by fostering collaboration and promoting co-learning ideals.

Scenario Examples

While all three skill sets overlap, it's certainly true that librarians will likely wear different hats at different times. To tease out the finer points of the skills and the different approaches they advocate for, this section presents a trio of scenarios in narrative format that illustrate the ways librarians can make a positive difference. These scenarios each highlight a particular role, though bits and pieces of the other roles can be identified.

The Orienteer-Librarian

Alex's day started as it often did, with a cup of coffee and the first two articles in the ever-growing pile on his desk. Though Alex read widely, there was always something new going on in the subject areas he served. He tried to make sure that he had at least a vague idea of new discussions in the field; having something to discuss with the liaisons in his departments made his role as library contact-person much easier, and made him more trustworthy as a subject specialist.

He was looking forward to a pair of meetings that afternoon. One, with the department of Decision Sciences, related enough to the information science Alex enjoyed that he always felt somewhat more at home there than in his other assigned disciplines. The other meeting promised to be interesting. Alex's library was investigating new ways to use Maker technologies, and he was one of the librarians who was most comfortable writing code and working with the admittedly-temperamental 3D printer.

He hadn't always been on speaking terms with the technologies available in the Innovation Studio, as they referred to it. In fact, he had always assumed that 3D printers were more trouble than they were worth. He'd heard stories from librarians he respected about the

difficulties involved in keeping a printer up and running, and couldn't see much use beyond novelty for "desktop" 3D printers. All that had changed when a combination of colleagues on long-term leave and a spate of retirements left the library shorthanded. After a hurried meeting to figure out an interim solution, Alex had been put in charge. Six weeks and one very helpful graduate student later, and Alex was a convert, using Thingiverse designs (and creating some of his own) to print out everything from model molecules to simple machines and lab-ready teaching tools.

Alex smiled as he thought back to those hectic six weeks. He'd been tossed into the deep end, given control of a lab with obtuse machines and a user base that could be most diplomatically described as "driven". In order to succeed, he had to immerse himself into maker culture and get his bearings in order to be helpful to new users of the space. He reflected on the good fortune that maker culture tends to be fairly collaborative--most times he had gotten stuck, he'd been able to find an answer online. Alex had relied on his knowledge of research and information-seeking skills to get him through the basics--even without knowing the subject domain well, he'd been able to find good questions to ask to get established. When new users of the Innovation Lab had needed help, Alex was generally able to get them the information they needed (even if it involved some furious googling).

Some of this, Alex now realized, stemmed from a general attitude that he could and would find an answer with--not just "for"--community members. Even when he felt completely out of his depth, he could rely on "old standby" techniques to get the information he needed, and because he strove to collaborate with information seekers, people were generally willing to bear with him when he couldn't answer a question right away.

On top of his other duties, everyone in Alex's department served regular shifts on the main research desk in the center of the busiest floor in the library. Students and faculty members would call, instant message, email, or stop by the desk in person in a steady stream whenever the library was open. Alex didn't mind desk duty, as the questions that came were impossible to predict, and would force him to flex his information-gathering muscles. After he finished his coffee and the current article (on intuition and the decisionmaking process especially in information-saturated environments), Alex gathered his things and headed out to the desk...

The Disruptor-Librarian

Sam parked her car in the deck and walked briskly to the door of Studio Dynamics, the coworking space she called "home" during the bulk of her workweek. A combination of shared workspace and startup incubator, "Dyna" was reinvigorating this corner of the rust belt city Sam loved. She dropped her jacket over the chair at one of the dozen-or-so workstations in the loft, and fired up her laptop to check that day's schedule. Unlike many of the other unattached occupants of the workspace, who paid a small fee to use the space and gain access to amenities from wifi to telepresence-capable conference rooms, Sam was officially an "information strategist" that had been hired to consult with the startups housed at Dyna. That morning, Sam had an extended consult with a pair of app developers who were trying to adapt their product for a new target market. She had worked with the two a few weeks previously, but apparently some new information had come to light--a competitor had scooped the Dyna developers' plan to build an information tool for cyclists.

Sam was already thinking about new ways to use their mostly-developed infrastructure for a new population. As an information strategist, Sam used the skills she had developed in her

library-science graduate program to challenge the status quo. In her experience working with the various startups that had come and gone from Studio Dynamics, Sam knew that the people who were so passionate about the ideas they were working on sometimes had a hard time with the "pivot"; a new iteration of the product or service with a changed variable somewhere. Sam was prepared. She had consumer research ready to go for a number of new demographics, and even more importantly, she knew what she wanted to ask the developers. The last time they had met, Sam's line of questioning focused on figuring out what information they needed. This time, her goal was to get the developers to think differently about their problem. They had been so focused on planning their app for cyclists that they couldn't break out of the pattern, and weren't sure where to go next. Sam knew she could help.

Sam began the meeting by asking the other developers to brainstorm all the ways their app could be used. As she expected, the ideas were fairly focused on cycling, but as time went on and the lists of ideas got longer, they started reaching for ideas in different ways, getting farther from the original plan and coming up with material Sam thought she could use. After brainstorming, the development team took each one of those ideas and worked through some basic logistics, step-by-step. Sam guided the conversation, asking questions as needed to help the developers clarify their ideas, but it didn't take long before everyone had a notebook full of new threads to follow up on. The developers thanked Sam for her help, scheduled a new meeting for the following week, and filed out of the room, leaving Sam just enough time to check her schedule and prepare for her next task...

The Pilot-Librarian

Sawyer checked his watch and reviewed his notes. Everything was arranged so he could find specific information quickly, from the Gantt chart laying out the entire project schedule to his agenda for the webmeeting that was about to begin. He was leading a grant-funded bi-coastal team of researchers through the lit-review portion of a new project. Though all of the researchers were comfortable in their own fields, the multi-disciplinary nature of their project--adding arts perspectives to the traditions of STEM fields, making STEM into STEAM--had many of the researchers unsure of the best approach. Sawyer had been brought on board to translate the jargon between fields, help the researchers code-switch, and do some foundational research. The PI's had quickly realized that Sawyer's skills in project management would also be useful for the team, and had brought him on board in a more official capacity.

After a few weeks quickly getting acclimated to the terms of the grant and to the project scope, Sawyer had proven invaluable when he had sorted out a major scheduling tangle and gotten everyone back on the same page. Today's meeting was designed to give everyone a chance to touch base on the various resources they'd found. Sawyer was tracking everything with an open-source reference manager, and was ready to provide suggestions on new threads of research. He was surprised to see just how much the other researchers had been finding--it seemed like every discipline had been thinking about ways to synthesize ideas from related fields, but they had all been going about it somewhat differently. Sawyer hoped to bring everything together into a single network and see what ideas excited everyone. He saw his role as most helpful at a meta-level, keeping an eye on the overall project schedule (hence the Gantt chart) and helping the researchers manage their sources (and soon, their research data).

Sawyer saw that most of the other participants had logged into the webmeeting software, so he took a deep breath, flicked on his audio feed, and welcomed everyone to a productive afternoon…

Conclusion

Each role has different strengths, and librarians who are particularly successful with one role may have a harder time getting into the mindset of another role. That said, the three roles offer librarians a way to describe and to think about their position helping their communities address problems. Because each role is bolstered by co-learning, librarians have a theoretical foundation to fall back on if they aren't sure what role to play.

Each of the three roles is described separately, but in practice librarians will likely find that they bring in elements of all three roles for a given problem. For example, a librarian may be somewhat unfamiliar with a project discipline (and thus be "orienteering") while still helping a client think about the problem in new ways ("disrupting"). Alternatively, a librarian may be brought on board to help manage research data and other information ("piloting") but still need to challenge their own and others' assumptions about the project itself ("disrupting") and learn as much as possible to succeed ("orienteering").

By thinking in terms of three related roles, it's easier for librarians to intentionally choose a particular role for a particular problem. Using the right tool for the right job is hardly a new concept, but it's helpful when practitioners can put names to the actions they're taking. By describing "disrupting" as thinking about a problem in new ways, they can deflect questions from community members about "making trouble" or "being obtuse." Similarly, there is

confidence to be gained from thinking, "Okay, I'm a little out of my depth here. Let me wear my 'orienteering' hat for a while and gain my bearings."

As librarians the world over challenge the traditional ideas of their role, and are shown to be dynamic, helpful people no matter what problem they face, it becomes even more vital that their actions are guided by co-learning ideas. When librarians grow accustomed to looking at their communities as collaborators, they can tap into an incredible wealth of information and support that will stand them in good stead moving forward. Librarians are forces for innovation, change, and information, but they aren't the only ones. By basing action on the ideals of co-learning, librarians of all types will find that their field of vision opens up, and they can accomplish great things.

---

[i] Brantmeier, "Empowerment Pedagogy."
[ii] Totleben and Deiss, "Learning Together."
[iii] Totleben and Deiss, "Co-Mentoring."
[iv] Keyser, "Active Learning and Cooperative Learning."
[v] Le Heron, Baker, and McEwen, "Co-Learning: Re-Linking Research and Teaching in Geography."
[vi] Okada et al., "Key Skills for Co-Learning and Co-Inquiry in Two Open Platforms."

Bibliography:

Brantmeier, Edward J. "Empowerment Pedagogy: Colearning and Teaching." *Indiana University*. 2005. Available online at http://www.indiana.edu/~leeehman/Brantmeier.pdf.

Keyser, Marcia W. "Active Learning and Cooperative Learning: Understanding the Difference and Using Both Styles Effectively." *Research Strategies* 17, no. 1 (2000): 35–44. doi:10.1016/S0734-3310(00)00022-7.

Le Heron, Richard, Richard Baker, and Lindsey McEwen. "Co-Learning: Re-Linking Research and Teaching in Geography." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 30, no. 1 (March 2006): 77–87.

Okada, Alexandra, Antonio Serra, Silvar Ribeiro, and Sonia Pinto. "Key Skills for Co-Learning and Co-Inquiry in Two Open Platforms: A Massive Portal (EDUCARED) and a Personal Environment (weSPOT)." *Open Praxis* 7, no. 1 (February 13, 2015): 83–102. doi:10.5944/openpraxis.7.1.174.

Totleben, Kristen, and Kathryn Deiss. "Co-Mentoring: A Block Approach." *Library Leadership & Management* 29, no. 2 (March 2015): 1–9.

Totleben, Kristen, and Kathryn Deiss. "Learning Together." *American Libraries* 46, no. 1/2 (February 1, 2015): 22–22.