COLLABORATE!

(IS THERE ANY OTHER WAY?)

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An article entitled "Then and Now: Looking back on 43 years as a librarian" appeared in the December 2011 issue of Searcher magazine. It was a poignant look back on the author's career as an academic reference librarian. The author, whose name is Ed Perry, tells a story of helping a student to decipher an assignment. He notes the difficulty that both he and the student had with this. Part of the challenge was that the librarian had no knowledge of the assignment.

The Oct. 15, 2005 issue of Library Journal profiled Nicole Brown, at that time a recent MLS graduate of Pratt Institute. It explains that she began working as a reference assistant in her campus library as an undergraduate. She says, "'It became apparent it was useful to have a student on the reference desk. … Say an undergraduate came up and said, 'I have to do a paper and I need ten sources.' I would know ('Do you have that class with Prof. X?'). I had seen the assignments, and the librarians hadn't. Ultimately the librarians loved what I did.'"

In both these examples, the librarians are totally out of the loop. They have no idea what kinds of assignments the professors are giving out – much less having any involvement in developing the assignments. There is no collaboration going on between the librarian and the subject instructors. To my way of thinking, that's a very sad and counterproductive situation.

points named, especially those of order and courtesy, if he is broken to harness in early life he will probably learn them; and to find out whether he will or not, let him be taken, in the first place, on probation, and if he falls short let him be dismissed without hesitation.

Second. As regards us who have long ago entered upon our duties, let the consideration of the qualifications needed properly to perform them stimulate us to renewed zeal in our daily work, and, above all, let us never consider our own education complete. Seneca acquired Greek at the age of eighty, and I know at least one man who took up German and mastered it when turned of fifty.

Finally, my friends, let us all do what in us lies to honor the high calling to which we have been chosen, never forgetting that it is to patient continuance in well-doing that the promise is annexed. The books which we keep are the record of the acts of other men, but we too are making a record day by day, which, like the rest, is preserved by the Keeper of the heavenly books. "And I saw . . . the books were opened: . . . and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works."

PERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN LIBRARIANS AND READERS.

BY SAMUEL S. GREEN, WORCESTER FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY.

WHEN scholars and persons of high social position come to a library, they have confidence enough, in regard to the cordiality of their reception, to make known their wishes without timidity or reserve.

Modest men in the humbler walks of life, and well-trained boys and girls, need encouragement before they become ready to say freely what they want.

A hearty reception by a sympathizing friend, and the recognition of some one at hand who will listen to inquiries, even although he may consider them unimportant, make it easy for such persons to ask questions, and put them at once on a home footing.

Persons who use a popular library for purposes of investigation generally need a great deal of assistance. A few illustrations will produce a vivid realization of the correctness of this statement. Here, for instance, is a wall-painter who has a room to ornament. He wishes to assist his imagination, and comes to the library to look at specimens of decorative painting. It does not serve the purpose of such a man to send him to the catalogues of the library and bid him select the books he desires. You must make the selection yourself, get the works he needs, and hand them to him. You have several to select from. Shall you give him Jones's "Grammar of Ornament" or Racinet's "L'Ornement Polychrome"? Certainly, if he wishes merely suggestion and inspiration, and to look only at details of ornamentation. These works contain examples of the best ornamentation in vogue in different ages and countries, and show the workman who aims at perfection what he has to attain to. Generally speaking, however, the work represented in these books is too elaborate for common use, is hard to execute, and would cost more than a householder is willing to spend in ornamenting a room.

The painter wishes also to see details in combination, and to judge of colors and figures in juxtaposition by looking upon

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This lack of communication and collaboration is baked into our professional philosophy as librarians. When it comes to the philosophy of reference service, one of the foundational documents is an essay entitled "Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers", which was written by Samuel Swett Green, the director of the Worcester, Mass. Public library, and published in the October 1876 issue of Library Journal.

Green's purpose in the article was to advance the radical idea that librarians should actually help people who came to use the library – especially those newbies who might be unfamiliar with it and even a bit intimidated. That was a great idea. But unfortunately, the 19th century concept was a limited one. Green envisioned the librarian as a quintessential generalist. In the article, he reels off a set of reference questions that showcase the librarian's resourcefulness on all subjects. From carpentry to philology and mythology, the librarian always has an answer.

Green does advocate librarians "mingling" with library users, or readers. But his idea of mingling is limited. It doesn't extend to true collaboration. The notion of service alone was radical enough for Green's time. Collaboration was a bridge too far for his day. But our professional service philosophy has gotten stuck in 1876. The standalone reference librarian generalist with an answer to every question, but no background knowledge, is no longer enough. It's time for a revolution in the conception of the librarian's role.

Examples of Collaboration
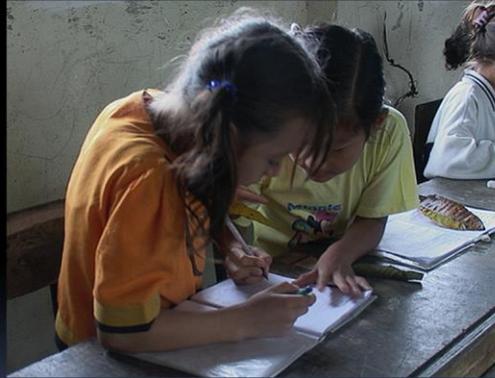
Fortunately there are many examples in the recent literature of close collaboration between librarians and subject instructors to improve student learning. I've studied several in my work on embedded librarianship.

In a university I studied, librarians participate in courses with first year undergraduates and again in a special major seminar for upperclass students. Both courses are interdisciplinary, team-oriented, and problem-based. Librarians present information literacy instruction early in the academic term, participate in the course, and are available to consult with student project teams. In some cases, they participate in project progress reviews, and on occasion they have been asked to contribute to grading.

In a statewide community college setting I studied, librarians are embedded exclusively in course learning management systems, virtually. They participate in all-online courses and also in the online component of courses that make use of both in-person and distance learning. They range across a variety of academic levels and subject fields, from a required introductory course, to a capstone course. Librarians and subject faculty often maintain close working relationships, and once a relationship has been established, the librarian and instructor tend to work together term after term.

At a for-profit online university, instruction librarians have an especially close relationship with the Psychology Department. The embedded librarian's role in graduate-level Psychology beginning courses started as providing research guidance and counseling to students through one-to-one communication in the course management system. The model evolved to one in which the librarian posted tips and suggestions proactively, and bundled responses to student questions into general responses. The themes were developed as the librarian gained insight into the typical problems that students encountered. This constituted a sort of customized Frequently Asked Questions approach.

Eventually, the Instruction Librarians created a research skill "companion" website with tutorial components. There is a self-assessment navigation option, where students can use their self-assessment to tell them which aspect of the website to review first. There is also a final assessment that tests them on their understanding of the concepts, generates answer feedback, and allows them to email a report of their results to their instructor. The librarians monitor the monthly trends for quiz data to help improve the website over time.

These are just a few examples I've witnessed first hand. There are many more like them in the literature.

The next question I'd like to address is, collaboration at what level? In each of the examples I've given, the collaboration seems to be at the individual course and instructor level. But in fact, robust collaboration takes place at more than one level. Several levels can be involved.

At the top is the institutional level. Many universities have established learning goals for undergraduate programs, or even for programs at the graduate level. In many cases, information literacy has been established as one of those learning goals. Sometimes it goes by another name, but competency at formulating good questions, locating appropriate information, using it critically, and ethically, and thereby solving a problem, is widely recognized as an important 21st century skill. Librarians collaborate at this level. In the examples I cited, librarians are not only engaged as collaborators with individual instructors for individual courses. They are also helping to shape the learning goals and curricula of their institutions.
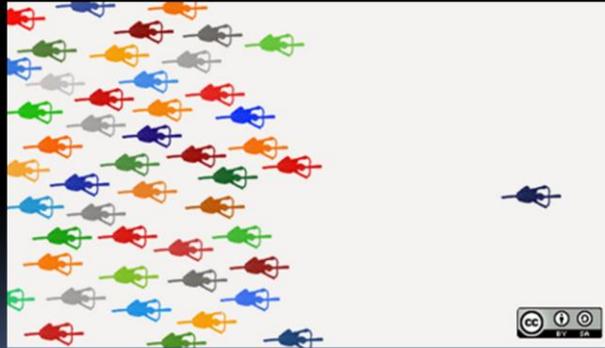
To be sure, there are alternatives to collaboration. One of them, of course, is the passive option of staying at the reference desk and answering questions, as Samuel Swett Green advocated.

Two others are the "one shot" information literacy or library orientation class, and the standalone for-credit information literacy course.

However, when we take a close look at the direction that these kinds of initiatives are taking, we find that they involve collaboration too. Maybe there really is no alternative!

Does Collaboration Work?

We do have evidence that embedded information literacy instruction, founded on close collaboration between the librarian and subject instructor, does work. Much, but not all of it is anecdotal.

In my own research, going back to my first example of collaboration, a story of a positive outcome in one Great Problems seminar was shared: in this seminar, thanks to faculty insistence, 90% of the students took advantage of the opportunity to work with their "personal librarian" for the course – a much higher percentage than usual. The instructor judged the research papers as being of exceptionally high quality and attributed much of the success to the influence of the librarians.

Another instructor I interviewed at the same institution made the comment that she could tell which students in her sophomore-level courses had worked with the embedded librarian as first-year students, because their work was noticeably better than that of other students.

At Cerro Coso Community College in Ridgecrest, California, Child Development instructor Lisa Fuller found that the percentage of students who successfully completed the research element of their class project rose from 29 percent to 67 percent after she collaborated with librarian Julie Cornett.

Megan Bowler and Kori Street report on an extensive experiment in embedded librarianship at Mount Royal College, in Calgary. Librarians collaborated with instructors in different ways and with different levels of involvement. Results were determined by student performance on course assignments, using a rubric that included information literacy as a factor along with other factors. Overall student numeric grades increased an average of 5.6 percent, with an increase of 12.9 percent in the information literacy component. Summing up their findings, they write that, "generally as the level of librarian embedment increased students' performance on the research component of the rubric increased as well." (Bowler & Street, p. 443)

At Purdue University, Amy Van Epps and Megan Sapp Nelson compared the effectiveness of the traditional "one-shot" instruction with and embedded, collaborative approach in which a course featured five 12-minute mini-lessons timed to coincide with course assignments. They found "a statistically significant difference between groups of students, demonstrating that the frequent, short library instruction sessions produce an increased use of high-quality content." (Van Epps & Nelson, p. 5)

There are other benefits to librarian – faculty collaboration as well.

First, student visits to the library go up. This was reported in the first case study of my own research that I cited earlier. The university library experienced a doubling of walk-in traffic over the five year period following initiation of the embedded librarian model, and the Dean and staff attributed it in large part to the increased visibility and role of the librarians in the teaching work of the university.

The visibility of librarians and libraries with faculty and academic administrators goes up as well. As the benefits to student learning are recognized, librarians are increasingly appreciated for their key role in the learning process.

Why does collaboration work? Why does it improve student learning, and carry the other benefits we've just mentioned? I'd like to offer a couple hypotheses that might answer that.

First, collaboration fits with what we believe about learning and cognition. It's consistent with Kolb's Model of learning and with the work of Anders Ericsson of Florida State on the importance of practice. It's also consistent with the Nobel prize winning work of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman on the availability heuristic, which includes the importance of salience (or vividness), recency, and connectedness.

Finally, it's consistent with what we know about human information seeking behavior. In his seminal book, The Atlas of New Librarianship, David Lankes quotes Jessamyn West, and I can't imagine saying it any better than this:
"when people have an information need, they'll always ask people they know before they ask a librarian. The trick is making sure that librarians are some of the people they know." (p.83)

Be aware, however, that real collaboration is hard work. It's intense and time consuming. You may have to rearrange other responsibilities in order to make time for it.

Nevertheless, don't settle for anything less than a true partnership with your subject faculty counterparts. I believe the benefits to students, faculty, and librarians alike will accrue in direct proportion to the strength of the collaborative relationship.

In one of my current research projects, we're attempting to evaluate the impacts of an embedded information literacy instruction program in a first year academic program. We're still in the preliminary stages and I can't share a lot of detail at this time. However, I wanted to leave you with one pair of comments that makes the point:

An embedded librarian wrote: "I was embedded in two different Learning Communities for a total of four classes. I attended many of the faculty sessions offered …. In this way, I was able to spend time talking with the faculty across the learning community … Additionally, I was:

- Invited to the classes early in the semester for a 10 minute Introduction
- Embedded in Blackboard for ENG 101
- Received all announcements …
- Skimmed readings … so that I was somewhat familiar with the content.
- Attended the pancake breakfast and Freshman Convocation.
- I was also invited to their … museum visit and early Orientation but wasn't able to make them all."

And from the instructor perspective:

"I think the particular librarian makes a difference. My embedded librarian, […], went out of her way to meet with me early in the semester and to offer herself to the students in many

ways. This caused me to integrate her more into my syllabus and curriculum than I would have if she had not taken the initiative."
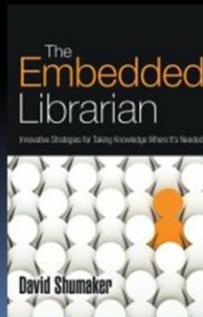
That's the kind of collaborative role I hope you'll aim for, and achieve. So, in the words of this photo, "don't be afraid, collaborate!"

Followup & Contact Information…

Email: shumaker@cua.edu

Blog: http://www.embeddedlibrarian.com

Book:

As you invent your future, please stay in touch. Email me. Check out the Embedded librarian blog for an occasional update on embedded librarianship. Get the full picture and a detailed map for inventing your future from the book. I wish you the very best success, and hope to hear from you!

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