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# Blended Librarianship

## *[Re]Envisioning the Role of Librarian as Educator in the Digital Information Age*

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Guest Columnists

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I was elated when John D. Shank and Steven Bell accepted my invitation to provide this updated perspective on blended librarianship. John and Steven developed this concept of librarianship in early 2004. In this column, Shank and Bell explain how blended librarianship relates to old and new service models of academic librarianship. They also discuss the growth of the blended librarians online community, a group that they cofounded. Their reflections on how blended librarianship has had an impact on the profession are especially interesting. Even more interesting are their thoughts on the future of blended librarianship. Shank and Bell have written and presented widely on this topic. Both are active members in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). Steven is the 2011–12 vice president of ACRL.—*Editor*

**C**hange pushes academic librarianship onward. In the past, change was slower and adapting to it was more manageable. Consider the amount of time that accumulated between the shift from librarian-mediated online searching, to supervised end user searching, to CD-ROM searching, and at present to web-based searching. Each successive transformation in the delivery of database content took less time than the prior shift. Each change increasingly affected and changed the way that academic libraries operated. Disruptive innovations (e.g., new computing technologies) now emerge with even faster speed and power to transform the academic library and the role of the academic librarian. This is the central challenge academic librarians confront as they examine their current and future roles in higher education. This article examines blended librarianship's (BL) vision of the educational role of the academic librarian within the context of radical paradigm shifts occurring in society driven by the evolution of information technologies. Furthermore, several ideas (i.e., information educator and educational partner) will be explored, which blended librarianship posits help clarify the current and emerging instructional roles of librarians in academia.

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### NEW REALITIES IN THE DIGITAL INFORMATION AGE: THE BIG SHIFT, DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION, AND THE INFORMATION TORRENT

In today's world, as Michael Wesch proclaims, "It's now ridiculously easy . . . to connect, organize, share, collaborate, and publish with anybody to anybody in the world."<sup>1</sup> He continues by asserting that "we have to move from

knowledgeable—that is just knowing a bunch of stuff—to being actually knowledge-able; that's being able to find, sort, analyze, criticize, and ultimately create new information and knowledge.<sup>22</sup> This is a profound shift. The size and magnitude of this shift is difficult to grasp. The new reality, as discovered by Martin Hilbert and Priscila Lopez, is that “daily digital activity contributes to a churning information tsunami. Humans generate enough data—from TV and radio broadcasts, telephone conversations and, of course, Internet traffic—to fill our 276 exabyte storage capacity every eight weeks.”<sup>23</sup>

John Seely Brown theorizes that for the first time in civilization, the traditional S-curve associated with societal infrastructural paradigm shifts—i.e., long periods of stability punctuated by short intervals of rapid change and disruption that is again followed by a long period of stability (decades)—no longer exists. Rather, in the “Big Shift,” exponential change is now the norm. This new paradigm leads to exponentially rising and compounding S-curves where the intervals between disruptive changes are shrinking and the long periods of stability that have traditionally existed are nonexistent.<sup>4</sup> If this is the case, then academic librarians must first have a clear understanding of why they and the library exist along with the ability to articulate it. The why is more significant than how of what librarians do, since the latter is going to be subject to constant, perhaps increasingly faster change.

Now consider this. Clayton Christensen explains that when he joined the Harvard Business School faculty he brought with him a puzzle: why do most companies that were viewed as unassailably successful in their industry tend to decline significantly after a couple of decades?<sup>5</sup> He discovered that disruption is the fundamental cause. Disruptive innovations (i.e., technologies) change the value proposition to a group of consumers. As David Lewis points out, this insight carries “valuable lessons for libraries that libraries ignore at their peril.”<sup>6</sup> For example, disruptive innovator (e.g., Google) challenges the powerful and successful incumbent (e.g., academic libraries) as the default search for basic information in the information access business. This will push the academic libraries to respond by either sustaining innovation (e.g., keep improving the same system and services) or become participants in creating disruptive innovation (e.g., replacing and inventing new systems and services), and this decision will determine the libraries future relevance.

Lastly, Joan Bechtel, a quarter of a century ago, insightfully explained that “the availability of information far outstrips most people's capacity to digest it.”<sup>7</sup> She points out that it is no small irony that in an age of information surplus librarians are “casting about for an appropriate myth or model for library service.”<sup>8</sup> The stream of information that existed twenty-five years ago has become a torrent today. The “Big Shift,” “disruptive innovation,” and the “information torrent” create a plethora of opportunities. In this context, one such prospect—rethinking the traditional educational role of the librarian—was recognized by blended librarianship.

## WHY THE BL PERSPECTIVE MATTERS: REIMAGINING A BRAVE NEW LIBRARY EDUCATOR ROLE FROM THE PAST

In this environment, librarians must respond to administrators who, like the chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, do “not know any more what an academic library should be.”<sup>9</sup> Take the chancellor's confusion one step further, and those same administrators may not know what a librarian is capable of doing. Blended librarianship arose out of this profound societal confusion over the future relevance of the academic library and the uncertain role of future college and university librarians.

Blended librarianship is intentionally not library centric (i.e., focused on the building and its physical collections) but, rather, it is librarian centric (i.e., focused on people's skill, knowledge they have to offer, and relationships they build). It focuses on answering why librarians matter to provide compelling reasons for why academic libraries remain essential and indispensable to the academy. In the future, the library as place and the containers its collections come in should not define the librarian as it has too often done in the past. Instead, the services (e.g., course related instruction) and products (i.e. information) provided by the librarians should.

The principle that librarians can and should be integral, educational partners as well as a catalyst for students' knowledge enrichment and intellectual inquiry guides blended librarianship. This aligns perfectly with the educational mission of colleges and universities; it also is why teachers teach. This is why Bell and Shank stress, “it is imperative and no exaggeration to claim that the future of academic librarianship depends on our collective ability to integrate services and practices into the teaching and learning process.”<sup>10</sup> Michael Miller insightfully declares that “the very forces that are changing the processes of learning and education are also changing librarianship. They are drawing it closer to and literally entwining it with those processes.”<sup>11</sup> The educational role is thus a primary goal of blended librarianship and the one examined in this work. However, blended librarians realize it is not nor should be, the only goal of academic librarians. Innovation and user-centered “design thinking” are critical to enhancing the selection, acquisition, distribution, and preservation functions of libraries too.<sup>12</sup>

While the teaching role of the librarian has been developing and evolving over the past century, it has not altogether been completely agreed upon.<sup>13</sup> BL accepts that the digital computer revolution has changed the paradigm by which society produces and consumes information, moving from an information model of scarcity and limited access, to an overwhelming abundance of both the quantity and formats of information available. This, combined with an ever increasingly, dizzying profusion of tools to create and access information, creates an environment where librarians are well positioned to be facilitators, navigators, and teachers. In an age where access to all types of information constantly surround us, pedagogically sound mediators and “guides by

the side” are sorely needed to assist in accessing and making sense of the ever more vast, and at times extremely chaotic universe of resources. Librarians have a historically, unprecedented opportunity to increase their relevance and participation through assisting faculty and other academic staff with student instruction in the various types of literacies (i.e., computer, media) or information fluency.

## BLENDING LIBRARIANS AS EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN THE DIGITAL INFORMATION AGE

Librarians are the technologists of their day; in the past, utilizing the analog tools (e.g., books) that allowed information to be recorded and shared. However, the mediums for creating, recording and sharing information have exponentially expanded in the digital information age. Blended librarians should push the boundaries of faculty, staff, and student adoption of new educational technologies to improve learning. In this manner, blended librarians play the role of compassionate, disruptive innovator on their campuses to be more responsive to the changes now affecting higher education.

To accomplish this, a librarian must possess the skills and knowledge necessary to employ the new digital technologies and information formats. Additionally, librarians will have to evolve continually just as the digital technologies and information formats do. Academic librarians must blend these skill sets and knowledge into the profession to be well situated to partner with and assist faculty and students. Thus, Bell and Shank proposed in 2004 that blended librarians combine “the traditional skill set of librarianship with the information technologist’s hardware/software skills, and the instructional or educational designer’s ability to apply technology appropriately in the teaching-learning process.”<sup>14</sup>

This definition enables librarians to answer the “how” to do their jobs in the future. Bryan Sinclair explains that “the blended librarian is versed in both print and online tools and can help faculty meet course goals, regardless of the medium or technology.”<sup>15</sup> By incorporating an understanding of and ability to use the ever-increasing amount of digital technology tools (e.g., software apps and mobile devices), librarians can assist and enable use of these tools in information discovery (research), access, and creation.<sup>16</sup>

Librarians can gain valuable insight into “how learning takes place, how structures for effective learning are designed, and how learning outcomes are assessed” by integrating a fundamental understanding of instruction design.<sup>17</sup> This knowledge will be critical to successfully partner with instructional designers and educational technologists as well as faculty. These partnerships are of increasingly, critical importance in higher education today. As courses progressively become more blended (i.e., integrating more online components—learning activities, resources, communication technologies, and assessments), instructors will need to partner with librarians and other support staff to develop more effective courses that enhance student learning, retention, and success.<sup>18</sup>

## BLENDING LIBRARIANS AS PARTNERS IN THE EVOLVING ACADEMIC LIBRARY

Scott Bennett declares, “In the twenty-first century, we need constantly to affirm that the most important educational function of physical library space is to foster a culture of intentional learning.”<sup>19</sup> The rise and development of the information, learning, and knowledge (ILK) commons reflects the outlook that libraries are changing from a quiet storehouse holding physical collections (i.e., the heart of the college or university) to a place where access is provided to a vast array of different types of resources both physical and digital as well as promoting social and intellectual activities.<sup>20</sup> The end implied by these names (i.e., knowledge and learning commons) is that knowledge can be gained by facilitating students access to, interaction with, and conversations about curricular information regardless of the medium. So too, learning can be encouraged to take place.

This mirrors the desired outcomes of a blended librarian. As reflected in Bryan Sinclair’s observation that libraries need to “develop new types of spaces for social, cultural, and technological ‘gathering’”—places where users can collaborate and work with trained professionals who understand the broader issues and contexts of information and technology.”<sup>21</sup> This cannot be achieved by all the various campus stakeholders working independently and in a vacuum, as is too often the case in higher education, but requires cross-functional teams be formed that are made up of people across the institution’s academic and administrative units.<sup>22</sup> Academic institutions will benefit from the increase in intellectual capital resulting from bringing people together, with different talents and perspectives, to achieve common goals—e.g., enhancing student learning, facilitating scholarly inquiry, and supporting faculty and student research.

Consequently, a necessary means for successfully creating an ILK commons is collaboration and the ability to partner with all the appropriate institution stakeholders (e.g., faculty, administrators, support staff, and students). The librarian acts as a facilitator to a campuswide conversation about relevant topics and issues of the day because of this strategic position within the ILK commons.<sup>23</sup> This means librarians have a new capacity to become “cooperation brokers” (i.e., mediators and facilitators) with academic support staff (information technologists, instructional designers, student learning center staff, etc.), faculty, and students that will allow librarians to deepen relationships and extend conversations with the academic community and the library.<sup>24</sup>

There is currently confusion in the literature about the collaborative role of the BL in the ILK commons. Sheila Corral correctly points out that “partnering and collaboration are central to Bell and Shank’s concept of the ‘blended librarian’.”<sup>25</sup> In contrast, Wolfe, Naylor, and Drueke’s claim that blended librarianship is in direct opposition to the learning commons model. They explain that the learning commons “brings together librarians and staff with specific skills whereas in the blended librarian model the reference librarian is

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expected to be expert in all areas.”<sup>26</sup>

Bell and Shank make clear that blended librarians are “T-shaped people,” they “have a principle skill (the vertical leg of the T), but they are so empathetic, or understanding of the users’ needs or situation, that they can branch out into other skills (the top of the T) and do them as well.”<sup>27</sup> This marriage between library science (the vertical leg of the T) and instructional design and technology (the horizontal leg of the T) does not necessitate that the blended librarian becomes the expert in the latter (instructional design and technology).

Similar to a marriage between two diverse people, each axis of the T remains separate and distinct (even while being connected). It means that librarians must be knowledgeable enough to adapt, practice, and most importantly converse with instructional design and technology staff—not replace them. It is this general understanding of the horizontal part of the T that informs the librarian and allows them to ‘blend in’ and share a common language. Thus, allowing librarians to have more productive conversations and richer relationships with these personnel.

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### WHAT BLENDED LIBRARIANS DO AS EDUCATORS IN THE DIGITAL INFORMATION AGE

Is it any wonder that in a “Big Shift” world where “disruptive innovation” is occurring rapidly librarians’ (as information professionals) will, as Sheila Corral explains, have “. . . overlapping roles, broad skillsets, stretched identities, . . .”<sup>28</sup> Obviously, librarians are not going to be playing only one role. As James Neal points out, in his discussion of the future of academic libraries, the core responsibilities are

information selection, acquisition, synthesis, navigation, distribution, interpretation, education, application, and preservation dominate. But new roles will shift the boundaries, expectations, and requirements. Traditional functions will be reengineered, eliminated, outsourced, and combined in new ways. Libraries will be aggregators, publishers, teachers, research and development agencies, entrepreneurs, and information policy advocates.<sup>29</sup>

The belief that academic librarians’ primary role, as well as demonstrating the relevance of the library, lies in their ability to impact and facilitate knowledge acquisition, student learning, and the attainment of lifelong learning skills guides blended librarianship. This is no small undertaking since society is in the midst of the ‘big shift’ where the information universe is expanding at an exponentially increasing rate and, as a result, many of the jobs of today will no longer exist in the future and the jobs of tomorrow are still yet to be created.

To achieve the aforementioned goal, blended librarians must be able to educate their faculty and students about existing and new information discovery, creation, and sharing

tools. Librarians need to extend their services beyond the traditional print and electronic sources such as books and articles. Blended librarians, as Bryan Sinclair explains, help instructors “who seek to use new forms of multimedia—streaming video, podcasts, digitized images, 3-D animations, screencasts, etc.—to engage students and enhance the learning experience . . .”<sup>30</sup> Blended librarians accept the challenge of providing access to *all* instructional materials.

This must include the quickly expanding world of educational Digital Learning Materials (DLMs such as games, simulations, and tutorials). Shank points out:

While librarians have been at the forefront of creating DLMs to enhance library instruction programs, we have been predominantly absent from assisting our users in locating, collecting, organizing, accessing this form of materials.<sup>31</sup>

Institutions of higher education along with the textbook publishing industry, educational broadcast media, educational software publishers, as well as professional and governmental organizations are increasingly creating DLMs. There currently are a number of high quality multidisciplinary repositories (databases) such as MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching—<http://www.merlot.org>), OER Commons (Open Educational Resources—<http://www.oercommons.org>), JORUM (<http://www.jorum.ac.uk>), and LORN (Learning Object Repository Network—<http://lorn.flexiblelearning.net.au>) that provide access to these educational resources. These databases have different search interfaces and use different search operators; both students and faculty would benefit considerably from librarians assisting them in identifying and searching these digital collections.

Additionally, blended librarians accept the challenge of learning about and assisting faculty and staff in the use of text and media authoring tools. This is important so that librarians can create multimedia (tutorials, webcasts, screencasts, podcasts, online videos, etc.) that can be used in the library instruction process. Moreover, as libraries increasingly integrate learning and knowledge commons they will offer digital and media commons services too. While library personal may not be directly in charge of this service, they will have to be able to provide adequate support for it.

Finally, blended librarians make use of Web 2.0 tools (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, etc. . . .) to increase their conversations and strengthen their relationships with faculty, staff, and students who are increasingly being educated in a blended learning environment. While there is a vast amount of literature written about Library 2.0 (which arose out of the development Web 2.0 on the Internet) in the past few years, Kim Holmberg, Isto Huvila, Maria Kronqvist-Berg and Gunilla Wide’n-Wulff explain that there is no agreed upon and authoritative definition that exists.<sup>32</sup> However, there are several key ideas that appear in the literature. They make clear that the “definitions focus on different parts of Library

2.0. Some chose to focus on Web 2.0 technologies, while others emphasize library services or user participation.”<sup>33</sup> The blended librarian views Library 2.0 as a natural extension of their efforts to further “blend” into the teaching and learning environment that faculty and students are increasingly employing.

To fulfill the evolving educational mission of the academic library, blended librarians must partner with faculty and staff to embed themselves and their instruction, as well as services, in courses and the campus curriculum. Mark Herring affirms that librarians should “strive to be involved in every aspect of information delivery wherever it occurs on our campuses: in the library, in the classroom, in the dorms, anywhere.”<sup>34</sup> In this sense, blended librarians are bedfellows with those embedded librarians who focus on being integrated into the college and university educational process.<sup>35</sup> Tim Held observes:

In this atmosphere of diverse challenges and responses to delivering information literacy, the trends of blended and embedded librarianship offer focused, empowering roles for librarians. These librarians lead rather than follow faculty, and they embrace technology for developing new services and relationships. Elements of these strategies include building an online presence, promoting expertise in instructional design, assessing, and becoming problem-solvers for faculty working in CMS. The goal is to partner with faculty, not simply support them.<sup>36</sup>

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## BLENDING LIBRARIANSHIP MOVING FORWARD: A LIBRARIAN AS EDUCATOR—METAPHOR FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The educational role of librarians is more essential today than at any other period in the profession’s long history. The growing torrent of digital information will challenge educators’ ability to teach the appropriate skills and knowledge that will allow students to become and stay “knowledge-able.” Blended librarianship can serve as a salient metaphor for the evolving educational role of the academic librarian in several ways.

Higher education courses are increasingly combining a mix of face-to-face and online elements, becoming blended or hybrid courses. Blended librarians knowledgeable in the use of Web 2.0 tools and emerging communication technologies can be directly present in both environments to provide course related instruction, deliver library resources and tutorials, as well as answer reference questions. Moreover, by integrating fundamental instructional design skills and knowledge, “blended librarians become partners with faculty and other academic professionals in designing courses and incorporating information literacy and research skills into academic programs to achieve student learning outcomes.”<sup>37</sup> As Joan Giesecke sums up, “Blended librarians therefore become part of the instructional development team.”<sup>38</sup> Lastly, possessing the skills to use new web-based technologies as

well as pedagogical knowledge to appropriately utilize these technology tools allows blended librarians to become instrumental participants in facilitating the conversations between administrators, faculty, information technology staff, instructional designers, and other educational support staff about being “knowledge-able” in the digital information age.

The founders of blended librarianship believed that for librarians to remain relevant they must be open to adopting new skills, knowledge, and ideas. It complements several of the emerging ideas about academic libraries and librarians today. Blended librarianship is essential to creating the partnerships and collaboration necessary to develop an institutions information, learning, and knowledge commons successfully. Blended librarians complement both the Embedded Librarian and Librarian 2.0. BL does not seek to replace instructional designers and technologists. Rather, it seeks to strengthen the ties and relationship between these professional groups so that together effective cross-functional teams can be created to work with faculty to enhance student learning.

While “blended librarians may be seen as a new metaphor for the librarian–educator metaphor that Dewey used,” as proposed by Joan Giesecke, people within the library profession still do not necessarily understand why blended librarianship matters.<sup>39</sup> Blended librarianship matters because it always strives to position the library, through its greatest resource—its people and their related skills, knowledge, and relationships, as a central and essential part of the evolving teaching and learning environment in higher education. The Blended Librarians online community (<http://blendedlibrarian.org>) has grown from fifty people back in 2004 to nearly five thousand today. Some graduate library school courses have integrated its ideas, a book and several dozen articles have been published, and numerous conference presentations and webcasts have been presented in the past half dozen years. Despite all this, where blended librarianship is headed and how it evolves (e.g., integrating “design thinking”) depends on how its ideas are perceived and integrated into the profession.

Perhaps the principal impact blended librarianship has had is as a metaphor that clarifies the educational role of today’s librarian. It depicts the librarian as an essential partner and leader in the educational process, working with and among many different campus departments, to enhance the teaching, learning, and research environment. Standing at the intersection of the learning and knowledge hub online or on campus, the blended librarian is the leader, who acts as the mediator and guide, to accessing and making sense of the ever expanding universe of information in all the forms that it takes.

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