The Embedded Academic Librarian

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Introduction

As public service professionals, librarians constantly seek to provide better service to their clients. Key to providing optimum service is the ability to understand user needs and perspectives. Perhaps the ultimate in user understanding is the recent phenomenon of embedded librarianship, where librarians go native by living and working right alongside faculty and students in the campus environment, not just in a single visit, but for the duration of the course or learning experience.

David Lewis, in his look into the future of the academic library, urged librarians to act without delay to “reposition library and information tools, resources, and expertise so that they are embedded into the teaching, earning and research enterprises” (2007, 420). The classic notion of the library as a repository for materials must be superseded by the philosophy of the library as active partner in the information experience. Public service librarians have historically been closest to the user in their daily activities of reference, library instruction, and liaison to academic departments. They can, and should, play a leading role in the quiet revolution to position themselves as full partners in the academic enterprise. Embedded librarianship is one way to do that.

Background

The notion of getting close to users is probably as old as librarianship. Ironically, many academic libraries arose from the Germanic model of departmental units that co-located (or
embedded) librarians and subject materials with the students and faculty of the academic department. That model lost favor when electronic materials began to dominate, especially in the sciences, and many departmental libraries were consolidated back into the main library. Embedded librarianship may be seen as a return to these academic roots.

The idea of actively being there with the user at the point of need, rather than waiting passively for the user to come to the library, goes back at least to the 1970’s when clinical medical librarians began to go on rounds with doctors in hospitals. The job of the CML was to listen to the cases being discussed at the bedside, identify points of information need, and then research and supply relevant information back to the medical team. Davidoff and Florance (2000) extended the clinical medical librarian concept to that of an “informationist,” who was seen as another specialist on the clinical team. While neither position of clinical medical librarian or informationist uses the embedded term, the concept was there.

Definition

Barbara Dewey was the first to coin the phrase “embedded librarian” in her seminal 2004 article. She borrowed the term “embedded” from the practice of placing journalists into field military operations in the Iraq war. It was the hope of U.S. military leaders that media reports would be more favorable, or at least more sympathetic, if they came from journalists who experienced the action first-hand as part of the combat team. The term is particularly apt, as the dictionary definition of embed is to “make something an integral part of.” ¹ In her view, Dewey explained that “Overt purposefulness makes embedding an appropriate definition of the most comprehensive collaborations for librarians in the higher education community” (2004, 6).

Dewey originally took a broad view of the concept of embeddedness, drawing analogies to a wide variety of situations in the campus environment, from co-location in collaborative
campus spaces to participation in research teams, to administrative involvement in high-level campus governance, and most pertinent to the reference librarian, to integration in the teaching and learning experience. The underlying theme in all of these collaborations was the “library’s transition from passive to active, reactive to proactive, staid to lively, and singular to social” (2004, 6). Following this manifesto, adoption of the notion of embedded librarianship was swift, with a number of creative spin-offs reported in the literature in the next five years and summarized below.

Models

Existing literature was consulted to identify and define major models of embedded librarianship. Rather than a straightforward list of models, the authors discovered, as did Shumaker and Tyler (2007), that the topic is more complex. The variety of approaches found in the literature suggests that the matter should be examined through different criteria of embeddedness: physical versus virtual presence, librarian role and function, level of embedment, clientele category, types of services and organizational structure. As might be expected, with such an assortment of parameters, there are wide ranges of possibilities for hybrid models to emerge. That the topic is an important one is demonstrated by the Special Libraries Association grant to Shumaker and Talley to research embedded librarianship, including identifying models (2009). Figure 1 illustrates different models of embeddedness.

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Following is a discussion of the various types and their characteristics.

Model by Presence

Physical
One of the most basic ways to identify embeddedness is by physical presence. It is recognized that one of the fundamental methods to increase interaction with faculty and students is to venture out of the library walls and meet them in their spaces on campus. Two of the main options for accomplishing this are by finding regularly scheduled space for interactions or by establishing a permanent co-location arrangement.

Libraries have experimented with a variety of approaches to reaching out to their clientele beyond the library. Many have looked around their campuses to identify high traffic areas to establish a presence. Locations include the student union, residence halls, and coffee shops. Rudin identifies this model as “outpost librarianship” (2008). However, selecting the correct location can be problematic, as some libraries have discovered that the types of interactions may be directly related to the service location. Rutgers librarians, who established an Outpost Service at the Busch Campus Center, found that 82 percent of their questions were directional in nature, most in reference to the Campus Center. Simon Fraser University librarians took a different tact establishing their remote locations in two faculty buildings. The majority of their questions were reference rather than directional. A comparison of the two approaches brings forth the possibility that types of questions are related to the normal function of the building where a service is located (Rudin 2008).

Co-location refers to space that is carved out in the customer’s workplace for a librarian to inhabit, either on a part time or permanent basis. In the first instance, regularly scheduled office hours may be established with the librarian assigned an academic department office during those hours, to facilitate accessible consultation to the faculty. In the second, the librarian becomes a permanent occupant in the academic department. Although the part time model is more common in academia (Shumaker and Tyler 2007), permanent co-location offers the most
promise for true integration into the fabric of daily faculty activity. It retains the best features of former departmental libraries with the economic and logistical advantages of managing the print and electronic collection from the central library. It is through this type of physical immersion that a librarian has the opportunity to truly join the conversations that take place both formally and informally.

A third model of embeddedness relating to physical space can be found through service-oriented collaborative campus spaces. Although there are many examples of these types of spaces being located in the library, there are also innovative examples of collaborative spaces that are located outside the library but have strong library connections, through combined services and staffing. Dewey cites examples of strategic collaborations for spaces including Washington University’s Nancy Spirtas Kranzberg Studio for the Illustrated Book (2004). This studio is a partnership between the University Libraries and the School of Art. The studio is dedicated to the study of the art of the book and Olin Library’s Special Collection librarians are involved with influencing curriculum in the Arts & Sciences’ Writing Program (Rogers 2007).

A fourth model of embeddedness relating to physical location is to follow faculty and students to remote locations away from campus for both course related instruction and/or service learning. Smith and Sutton (2008) describe a two-week road trip to the Deep South with a sociology class in social stratification. Course integrated instruction, technology management and service learning in a Katrina-damaged library were integral parts of the unique, experiential course.
The ability to embed is not limited to a physical presence. With the explosion of online learning environments in higher education, naturally librarians have investigated ways to embed their services virtually.

The most common example of virtual embedding is found in library and librarians’ presence in course management systems such as Blackboard, Sakai and Moodle, which are standard at many college campuses. As use of these products has become the norm, faculty and student demand for integration of library support has emerged in order to provide “one-stop shopping” (Washburn 2008). Whether it is through a built-in module (such as Blackboard’s building blocks) or a result of local customization, use of library integration tools lends itself to librarian involvement. A minimal level of integration can take place through an automatically generated default link to library resources that is inserted into every class in a course shell. More ambitious approaches include the provision of course-specific links to resources, participation in discussion via email and discussion boards and taking on an instructor’s role through writing and administering quizzes (York and Vance 2009). York and Vance’s review of the literature reveals a number of roles that librarians play in CMS systems: course librarian (providing research assistance), lurking librarian (observer who monitors course discussion and initiates communication in response to perceived needs), technical innovator (enhancing delivery of information within the CMS through customized additions such as an RSS feed), and instructional designer (2009).

Developments in virtual social environments have expanded embedment opportunities beyond the traditional course management system. Today’s social networking technologies offer a myriad of possibilities to support reference and information literacy instruction as well as research collaboration, by putting librarians where their users are. Over the past few years, wikis
and blogs have become popular venues to establish collaborative environments for research and study. In addition to using these environments to provide services and establish a library presence, librarians have been early proponents for the promise offered by social networks such as Facebook and Web 2.0 applications such as Flickr (image sharing) and Twitter (microblogging). These technologies have current functionality that facilitates library embedment (such as the ability to insert chat, RSS, library catalog and database searching into a local or external website). At Wake Forest University, librarians have successfully partnered in collaborative ventures with professors to leverage the interactive capabilities of these technologies (Smith and Sutton 2008). Facebook groups and pages have also been used effectively by the WFU librarians to serve as de facto course frameworks that promoted student-driven participation and interaction within their own social spaces (Mitchell and Smith 2009).

Library presence in virtual worlds can take embedment to the next level by providing a 3D environment for communication and collaboration that reaches out to users beyond a library’s defined clientele. Second Life was established in 2003 and by 2006, the Alliance Library system, a consortium of Illinois libraries, created the first virtual library using avatars to provide reference services. Others have followed to establish virtual facilities there as well. Those who are experimenting with this paradigm believe that there is value in establishing a presence but acknowledge technical and resource barriers to maintaining effective services. (Godfrey 2008).

**Model by Role and Level of Embedment**

A second way to define a model of embedment is to examine the roles played by librarians. As can be seen through the discussion of physical/virtual embeddedness, there are different roles that librarians fill depending on client needs and expectations. One theme that
appears in the previous section is the role of research outreach to students. A subsequent role has developed from a model familiar to academic librarians- that of liaison to an academic department. Traditionally, a liaison interacts with the department in matters affecting collection development activities, including acquisitions of print and electronic resources. In the age of embedment, this relationship is being expanded to include a more comprehensive integration that promotes a higher degree of involvement in a department’s activities, ranging from attending departmental meetings to serving on departmental committees (Rudin 2008).

Kesselman and Watstein defined two major types of roles that occur in the academy: course-integrated instruction and membership in research teams (2009).

Course integrated instruction is the most prevalent form of embeddedness for academic librarians and can take place in-person, virtually or in a hybrid environment. The defining components are that the focus is on student services and that instruction is designed to address specific content and assignments being covered in a course. Of course, specific roles within this model will vary depending upon negotiations with the course professor. This can result in a different experience and level of effectiveness that is defined by the level of embedment. How frequent is contact with the students? Does the librarian interact throughout the course or are there limited contacts? What level of instruction occurs? Does the librarian provide links to resources, participate in discussions or help design the instruction and teach the class? In their 2008 article, Bowler and Street report on their local study to determine whether different levels of librarian embedment correlated with improvement in undergraduate students’ information literacy skills. They found significant improvement in students’ scores when a librarian was conspicuously embedded in the classroom.
Membership in teams can take different forms as well. An early model of embeddedness can be found by looking at clinical librarianship, an idea conceived by health science librarians in the early 1970’s. The model was established to meet the need doctors had for quick access to their professional literature and information (Lappa 2004). The role of the clinical librarian is to provide immediate responses to information requests related to patient care. The librarian is a member of the clinical team and provides research support. An update to this model is known as the clinical informationist. These librarians work outside the library and are salaried by the clinical department (Kesselman and Watstein 2009). Membership as a partner in research and its outcome requires a different level of knowledge by librarians. In addition to their expertise in searching and evaluating information, there is a need for a higher level of subject expertise and of the faculty research process (Dewey 2004).

A new role has emerged in recent years, that of librarian as academic co-creator. In this model, students, faculty, and librarians are all co-creators of the research and learning process (Dewey 2004). As scholarly communication becomes a growing focus on many campuses, so do the opportunities for collaboration between librarians, faculty, students and administrators. It requires teamwork from all stakeholders to build an infrastructure that supports knowledge creation, copyright compliance, dissemination of scholarship, local and open access publishing and institutional repositories.

**Model by Client Category**

In the preceding sections, models have been described with references to framing them by client type. In the academy, there are three main groups with which libraries can develop embedment opportunities: students, faculty and administration. The group not yet detailed, but one that is key to finding acceptance and developing opportunities for leadership roles on
campus, is the administration. Dewey (2004) calls the librarian in this role the “campus librarian”. In this model, librarians proactively embed themselves in projects beyond the library and in the governance of the university. By becoming involved in campus-wide projects, they are able to understand campus agendas and interject the library’s strategic needs into the larger university picture. Administrative departments will quickly discover the insight that the library can bring to the table. Some important groups with which to embed include the faculty senate, campus advisory groups, university committees, department of institutional research, development office, information systems, academic departments and central administration, including, of course, the chief academic officer’s office (Dewey 2004).

**Model by Services Performed**

In this model, embedded librarians are defined by the kinds of services that that they provide. In a 2007 survey, Shumaker and Tyler asked embedded librarians to rate the importance of the services they provided. Academic librarians rated “in-depth research and analysis projects” and “instruction in information retrieval” equally as most important. These were followed in descending importance by “ready reference”, “current awareness”, “maintaining a library of print materials,” and “stewarding or maintaining a website for the customer group.” Further research is necessary to correlate user ratings with those of librarians. Do users value the same vital services as librarians?

**Model by Organizational Structure**

Organizational embedding refers to how the embedment arrangement is funded and managed. These are variations on the traditional concept of departmental and branch libraries. In some cases, the librarian is co-located in an academic department but still reports to the central library. In others, the librarian is supervised and funded by the customer group.
academia, at the time of the 2007 survey, 88 percent of the academic librarian respondents reported to their parent central library and only 15 percent were funded by their customer groups. (Shumaker and Tyler, 26) Freiburger’s accounting of the Arizona Health Sciences Library’s decentralized service (where librarians assigned to four academic departments were maintained on the library payroll), may convey a common rationale. “Keeping the librarians on the library payroll serves to reinforce the fact that the liaison service is a library activity and serves a common good” (2009, 140).

Trends and the Future

The essence of librarianship is to identify user information needs and find ways to meet them. Both Dewey (2004) and Lewis (2007) have urged librarians to leave the library and embed themselves and their skills as deeply into the fabric of the campus environment as they can to become equal partners in the teaching and learning experience. Embedded librarianship may be seen as the culmination of many years of movement in this direction. Academic institutions started out with numerous branch and departmental libraries on campus and then consolidated back in a central movement when digital materials became prevalent. But the move to digital libraries had the unexpected consequence of reminding students that the library was more than a place for materials. It was also a place for help, support and guidance in the use of those and other information materials. So, ironically, the “library as place” movement began concurrently with the migration from print to electronic materials. Similarly, as soon as departmental libraries were consolidated back into the main library or other groupings then the advice to move back into the domain of the faculty and student began.

Public service librarians have taken this advice to heart and introduced all the creative examples of embedded librarianship found in this chapter. They have ensconced themselves in
the classroom, the lab, the student union, the dorm, the hospital bedside, the website, the course management system, and even boarded the bus for a two week living experience. With the inevitable march to the digitization of the entire scholarly record, those librarians who have embedded themselves directly into the user experience as a vital and necessary component to the process will make themselves indispensable.

In times of economic hardship, librarians (or administrators) who are new to the embedded experience might think it is a luxury that can be dropped to conserve resources when things get tight. Similarly, Shumaker asked who picked up the duties that embedded librarians left behind when they boarded the bus or attended every class. With no new resources (and sometimes far fewer), it is difficult to maintain new programs like these. However, librarians and administrators need to look closely at which programs best meet user needs. It might be the case that long-established but little-used traditions like staffing the reference desk with professional librarians every hour of the day are better candidates for elimination than targeted embedded services that prove indispensable to faculty and students. The librarian who is deeply embedded into the fabric of the campus mission and defines success by the accomplishment of user goals will be best equipped to survive the continuing evolution of higher education, even in the most difficult economic times.

Notes


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**Additional Readings**


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