Is (Academic) Librarianship Dead?

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Since attending the 70th APLA conference in Halifax this June, I have been contemplating the notion that librarianship, specifically academic librarianship, is dying or “in its end game” to quote outgoing APLA president Su Cleyle. My response to this idea is absolutely not. But after three days of meetings and sessions I began to connect the dots and realized that whether you think librarianship is dying a not-so-slow death depends very much on your definition of librarianship.

This conversation that permeated the conference made me think back to when I heard Michael Gorman speak at CLA a few years back. The jist for me was this: If we don’t change, but protect our enduring values, it’s all over. Perhaps Su Cleyle, Michael Gorman and I simply have different definitions of librarianship. I came to this conclusion as I wandered down Barrington St. in the rain after an Information Literacy Interest Group meeting. I suspect that Cleyle and Gorman’s definition may be based on their experiences at larger institutions and their interpretation of librarianship may be a more traditional view of librarianship with focuses on collection development of print resources and staffing the reference desk. I am not implying that either of them is old-fashioned, but that their cause for concern about the profession may be based on different experiences from mine and others.

This was confirmed during one of the many chats I had with President Su, when I explained I was busy with initiatives such as setting up open access journals for faculty members as a hands-on way to teach undergraduates the double blind peer review process. Her response was “but that’s not librarianship”. My definition of academic librarianship is “whatever I am doing” because I am an academic librarian. The eureka moment for me was when I realized how lucky I have been over the last 12 years to work where I do; a place where there is a culture of scholarship and innovation that has allowed librarians to flourish and move forward into a world of beta librarianship - relevant, reliable, but in constant flux. This is my definition of librarianship.

I do believe that the traditional model of librarianship is in its end game. For instance, in their session “When Tuples Sparql: Weaving the Semantic Web”, Lisa Goddar and Gillian Byrne presented a glimpse of the future and the semantic web. The semantic web will force us to change the same way Google did. At the beginning of the Google revolution, many in the library world resisted the general population’s embrace of it. You’ve all heard the defence: Google gives you lots of results, but our databases, books and expertise would give the best results. Librarians and faculty members gained a reputation of hating free sources of information such as Google and Wikipedia too. But it was futile to fight against these popular resources and we began to re-evaluate one of our core values: critical thinking. We taught students how to evaluate and adopt a contextual approach to correctly using the resources they WANTED to use and so reference and teaching librarianship stayed relevant.
We may still have a role in finding the best resources for the patrons’ needs, but the semantic web may change all of that. When a search engine can give you the best results, what will we do then? I think one of our new roles will be creators within that semantic web, as librarians and archivists continue to digitize and describe collections, the markup and ontologies developed will be critical to the accessibility of our resources. We need to learn new skills, we should want to adapt; we need to.

Adapting can be difficult for some - but why? An answer to that question came to me in Ken Roberts’ session entitled “What the Heck Does Collaborative Management Really Mean”. In his session, Ken described ten traits of a positive organizational culture based on the examples of Hamilton Public Library and the University of Guelph. Of the ten, two were highlighted as being ideal: decision making processes that were transparent and that failure should not be punished. You simply cannot have an innovative workplace if staff are not encouraged to try new things and won’t go on their own because they are afraid to fail. The culture of innovation is going to save our profession. I believe that my willingness to try new things and embrace change is an adventure, and a big part of why I still love being a librarian!

As always, I hope you enjoy this issue of the journal.