The Journey of a “Feral Librarian”

When I was an undergraduate in the late 1980s, I stood (or crouched) in front of the handsome wooden drawers of the card catalog to riffle through the yellowed cards in search of books. “Library automation” was happening in academic libraries across the country, including my college's pioneering work, supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to develop a single integrated library system with consortial partners. Users couldn’t see this “automation” yet, though; they had to go behind the scenes to the library’s back offices where this transformation was taking place. As a student employee in the InterLibrary Loan (ILL) office, I was trained to use the OCLC terminal to process requests, from scholars at other institutions, for articles in print journals at our library. Once I identified the correct journal volume, I would walk upstairs to the stacks, pull the volume from the shelf, return to the staff office to use the photocopier (a zillion passes of light over journals crammed open at the spine to capture those print pages), and finally send the pages off through the US postal service.

As a PhD student in the 1990s, I would march over to the reference room at my university’s graduate library and find the particular station equipped with the right Silver-Platter or other CD-ROM reader for the specific indexes I needed to search, usually Modern Language Association databases, to figure out what the literary critics and theorists had said through the decades about particular texts. I learned esoteric function-key combinations so that the machine would yield my needed citations. The process was new, a little tedious, and awfully exciting. Then, citations in hand, I would head off to the stacks to find the right volumes, pluck them off the shelves, drag my pile over to the photocopier, pay for my copies, and haul my treasures back to my carrel at the English department.

My own career path shifted in the late 1990s and early 2000s from scholarship/teaching to humanities computing to academic technology management to digital library development to IT and library leadership, always working with faculty, staff, and students on the ways that technology could enhance, and occasionally even positively transform, scholarship and education. Along the way, I teamed up with systems librarians and research and instruction librarians to design and develop one of the early electronic reserves tools. Integrated with the learning management system, it enabled all parties to do their part in making resources easily available to students: instructors could submit their requests electronically, and librarians could provide a persistent link to the electronic resource within the course website (or a citation for a print item and associated library location when e-resources were not available). As a result, students could click those links to access their readings.

At another institution, I partnered with the head of archives and digital collections to support a matrix team of archivists and special collections curators, systems administrators and developers, and designers and user experience specialists to develop an institutional digital library platform based on community-source tools. We partnered with traditional research and instruction librarians and “technical services” librarians to create the ingest and metadata management workflows that would enable colleagues to access the many electronic materials owned and stewarded by the libraries: from data sets for GIS (geographic information system) and social science research to unique digitized collections.

At each juncture of e-content production and stewardship, colleagues from national higher education networks addressed national and international e-content life-cycle and workflow challenges. The Digital Preservation Network (DPN) was one such ambitious endeavor that represented a compelling potential model for collectively ensuring that the cultural heritage and scholarly record we now steward in distributed electronic form across many institutions and innumerable digital repositories might be sustained, against technological changes, corporate transitions, geopolitical disruptions, and administrative turnover. This was a brilliant attempt at massive collaborative problem solving (MCPS), and many of us in IT and library leadership advocated for our institutions to invest in the DPN. Investing in long-range collaborative solutions when immediate pressures predominate is courageous and difficult, but our presidents and provosts saw that the magnitude of the challenge of managing e-content exceeds what any single institution can address. In the wake of the DPN project, other models for MCPS around national and international digital preservation will take shape, just as we’ve moved through many generations of program design and development in humanities computing, digital humanities, and digital scholarship, through many generations of open-access scholarly publishing experimentation, and through many generations of digital asset management and discovery interface development.

At the 2005 ACRL annual conference, Jim Neal coined the phrase “feral professionals” to describe the many...
forms of professional positions that were beginning to appear, sometimes embraced and sometimes resisted, within academic libraries. The session offered his deeply informed sense of how academic libraries have evolved and are evolving to meet a spectrum of daunting and exhilarating missions at the institutional, consortial, national, and international levels. Reading this piece as I was preparing in 2013 for the lovely welcome event that the Friends of the Bryn Mawr College Libraries were hosting for me as the incoming Chief Information Officer and Constance A. Jones Director of Libraries, I realized I was a “feral librarian” with a deep love of libraries and sense of stewardship for our scholarly and cultural heritage collections. I wondered whether the members of our Friends group would accept as legitimate a head of libraries who could not officially call herself a card-carrying member of the library profession and who came “from the IT side.” I had fewer doubts about my colleagues within the libraries, in part because I have an academic background and an understanding of scholarly practices and in part because my entire career had been spent in collaboration with and in leadership roles within libraries.

I entered humbly into my current role—always a “director of libraries” and never a “librarian” out of respect for the library and information science credentials and education of my colleagues. At the same time, I came with the gifts of having witnessed numerous professions come into being around me as my non-librarian colleagues and I performed jobs without time-honored titles and grappled together to create coherent taxonomies for our new fields. I remember a meeting at an EDUCAUSE annual conference where a constituent group came up with “instructional technologist” as the consensus name for our emerging profession and mapped all of the diverse pathways that the dozens of attendees in the room had taken to reach their current “instructional technology” roles.

I also came to this role with a deep appreciation for the semi-arbitrary nature of organizational structures and boundaries, having seen many configurations that work well, having observed the same functional team positioned successfully under a variety of different organizational umbrellas, and having experienced the differences that can be achieved with respect and commitments to collaboration for the greatest good of the institution regardless of the particular organizational structure. I’ve learned that we get invested in professional labels and in territorial boundary assertions when we’re feeling insecure about environmental changes that might adversely affect our sense of value or agency or power within our institutions and broader cultures. And I’ve learned that the antidote is to focus on our inherent worth across disciplines as we bring our diverse capabilities together in service of the missions we share at the organizational, institutional, and cultural levels. This means identifying the capabilities we need to fulfill our goals, doing all we can to develop those new capabilities within our own talented teams, recognizing and celebrating strengths and successes, and welcoming colleagues who bring complementary frames of mind and skill sets to support our collective transformation and delivery of services and programs that meet the demands of the changed environment.

Kudos to academic libraries and archives for transforming positions and ways of working so significantly while remaining true to a core purpose. “Library automation” in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s generated library systems teams, data integration librarians, and new workflows. The shift from print serials to CD-ROMs to electronic journals and databases delivered over the internet brought electronic resource managers, different forms of vendor management, and new workflows. Staying current with the transforming lifecycle of scholarly production and communication required the advent of digital scholarship specialists, digital library and institutional repository managers, metadata specialists and digital collections librarians, digital archivists and digital preservation specialists, and new workflows. Consortial efforts to create platforms that would serve the needs of our higher education and cultural heritage institutions produced developers of open-source digital library platforms, innovative architectures, and once again, new workflows.

Kudos to my higher education IT and library colleagues for teaming up to enable automation and digital modes of scholarly production and reception, for retooling to develop enhanced skills and digital competencies within existing roles, and for continuing to define entirely original job types essential to this ever-evolving work.

Kudos to the MCPS dreamers who bring together colleagues from across diverse and emerging disciplines to address the complex challenges that are emerging as scholars produce, search through, learn from, and hope to find again the ever-burgeoning flow of digital information. And kudos to all of us for having the courage to lean into the discomfort of transformation, to question how our practices fit our evolving context, and to continuously learn and change.

Notes

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