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The blended librarian in the learning commons

New skills for the blended library

In 2004, Steven Bell and John Shank presented their blueprint for the “blended librarian,” defined as

. . . an academic librarian who combines 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.¹

These authors posit that the “blended librarian” is a necessary response to the marginalization of the academic library. As the library ceases to be the *de facto* center of information on campus amid the growing popularity of learning management systems, ebooks and ejournals, online textbooks, Amazon, Google, and a host of other competing commercial services, librarians must assert or reassert their role in the teaching and learning process. For well over a century, librarians have been trained in the organization, maintenance, access, and retrieval of information, and our profession has a long history of public service and commitment to the information seeker and learner. The blended librarian takes these traditional skills and values and enhances them with the latest developments in information technology and instructional design in order to meet the needs of the 21st-century learner.

“Academic librarians, at the core of their profession, are educators,” Bell and Shank wrote in 2007, and the work of academic

librarians is “directed to helping students and faculty achieve academic success.”² But librarians can no longer position themselves at service desks and wait for students and faculty to come to them. We must work to blend library and information services into the teaching and learning process by applying “design thinking,” which involves, first and foremost, putting ourselves in the place of the user in order to understand how the user can receive the “optimal learning experience.”³ The blended librarian on today’s campus seeks to meet the user on the user’s terms.

The blended librarian is focused on course goals and learning objectives outside of the library and across the curriculum. Books, articles, and reserve readings (both electronic and print) may meet the needs of many faculty and students. But for 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, the blended librarian is there to provide guidance and expertise, as well. Perhaps the learning objectives are more collaborative in nature and would benefit from social software in the form of wikis, blogs, video sharing, discussion forums, and other tools offered through a learning management system. The blended librarian is versed in both print and online tools and

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can help faculty meet course goals, regardless of the medium or technology.

Essentially, this is a new call to outreach. The blended librarian seeks to build new collaborations with students, faculty, staff, and other information and instructional technology professionals both in and outside of the classroom—in physical spaces and virtual environments—in order to match learners and teachers with the information tools they need.

The evolving academic library

While the future of the library as a storehouse of printed texts remains uncertain, we have seen something of a renaissance in academic libraries over the last five years in terms of space planning and learning spaces. This is evident from the numerous articles, books, reports, and Webcasts from ACRL, Council on Library and Information Resources, EDUCAUSE, and our other professional organizations.⁴

Many academic libraries are seeking to reinvent their physical spaces, transforming them into social, cultural, and technological centers where students, faculty, and other users can gather and work collaboratively with digital and print media under one roof. The learning commons now found in many libraries demonstrates how librarians are seeking to reinvent themselves in order to meet changing student needs.

The learning commons may be seen as an extension of the classroom experience. When it is equipped, furnished, and staffed with Bell and Shank's ideas in mind, it can foster student learning in new and creative ways—ways that may not be available or conducive in the typical college classroom. Today's learning commons is not a static computer lab,

rather it incorporates the freedom of wireless communication, flexible workspace clusters that promote interaction and collaboration, and comfortable furnishings, art, and design to make users feel relaxed, encourage creativity, and support peer-learning. To this

add self-help graphics services, color imaging, audio and video editing, and other production and presentation software and it becomes a one-stop collaborative for out-of-class assignments, writing, research, and group projects.⁵

The space employs design that focuses on and accentuates students' propensities for social learning. Workspaces are modular, flexible, and comfortable, allowing for different group sizes and configurations, from individuals working with a mentor to larger groups. Large widescreen monitors allow everyone seated around the table to be part of the project. The space supports hands-on problem solving and provides the perfect setting for students, peers, and librarians to share and learn from each other. We've only seen the beginning of these new types of learning spaces, which will continue to evolve with technology. Blended librarians are needed to work in and help develop these spaces now and in the future.

As we work to reinvent library spaces, Bell and Shank's call to action is all the more relevant and timely. The challenge now is to redefine, retrain, and recruit library personnel to work in these "blended libraries," to realign precious resources to address today's and tomorrow's users with the wide range of services they expect and need from us and our facilities.

A new type of learning space, a new type of service

One unit in today's academic library whose future is uncertain is the reference desk, leaving some librarians wondering if it is still relevant or needed.⁶ This is not so much because students, faculty, and other users no longer have questions—it's that the nature and extent of their information needs have changed. In the past, a reference librarian might assist a student in retrieving specific information, point him or her to a photocopier, and be done with the transaction. This is no longer enough. Let us not forget our profession's focus on information

literacy as defined by ACRL that stresses the student's ability to

- *determine* the extent of information needed;
- *access* the needed information effectively and efficiently;
- *evaluate* information and its sources critically;
- *incorporate* selected information into one's knowledge base;
- *use* information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose; and
- *understand* the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally.⁷

The reference interview/transaction, as traditionally practiced in most libraries, met the student only part of the way on this continuum, focusing primarily on the first two bullets: determining the information need and access. This interaction did not typically focus on teaching or learning outcomes per se, but on responding to specific requests. The reference desk was reactive, often passive. In addition, librarians were dealing primarily with fixed media arranged predictably on library shelves where we had complete control.

The Internet and Google have changed the playing field dramatically and irrevocably. Online information now dominates. Hypertexts, digital media, and interactive Web 2.0 "documents" (if we can even continue to call them that) can be revised, moved, and changed quickly and without much effort.

What was there yesterday may be different today; what is there today may not be there tomorrow. This raises all new types of questions about evaluating information and its sources critically. Librarians who can adapt to the changing information landscape quickly and easily will be sought after in the blended library.

Libraries still have a place on today's campus, but we must expand what we offer if we expect users to come to us. The learning commons is precisely the type of space where the blended librarian can thrive, and

the blended librarian is needed if the learning commons is to be successful. With the right staffing, the learning commons can be a vibrant and engaging collaborative space where users receive personalized hands-on instruction at the point of need.

Here is one example involving a student in need of demographic information for a class project.

Undergraduate Susan discovers the U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder Web site by performing a Google search for "race and population data" at one of the computer stations in her library's learning commons. She is in need of comparative racial data for different counties in her home state but is not having much luck navigating the Census site and refining her search. A roving blended librarian walks by and notices she might need some help. After a few minutes, Susan has displayed a detailed table with some useful data for her project.

But now what? Susan has numerous options. She may just want to print it. Simple enough. But the blended librarian in the learning commons can help the student explore multiple ways to output, work with, and incorporate that information. Perhaps she would like to download the data into spreadsheet software. How about incorporating it into her paper, presentation, or Web site? Perhaps a three-dimensional bar graph generated by the spreadsheet software would be ideal for this figure. The student may not even know about this option. Perhaps she would like to create a thematic map of the data in a magenta, green, or violet color scheme to really highlight the contrasts (yes, the Census Bureau Web site will let you do this). And what about the ethical concerns? Just because the technology allows you do something, is it ethical to extract specific data, repackage it, or to take information out of context for one's own purposes?

And how do you cite this in APA style, anyway?

Working with the student to explore all of these options and issues is all in a day's

work for the blended librarian in the learning commons. Communication is key, not only with the student but with the instructor. The blended librarian is focused on the student's immediate information need, but also with the broader learning objectives of the assignment and course.

Promoting the learning commons and blended librarianship

The following are some steps that blended libraries and librarians can take to better promote the learning commons, ourselves, and our services:

1. *Be change agents on campus, that is, be early adopters, promoters, proficient users, and supporters of instructional technology.* Let the learning commons be a "test kitchen" for new hardware, software, and tools for online learning. When it comes to innovation and learning, make sure that the library and librarians are foremost in the minds of faculty and administrators.

2. *Partner with faculty.* Develop new programs and services jointly that focus on new ways of student learning. Provide and support specialized software (GIS, SAS, Mathematica, etc.) and hardware (multimedia stations, plotters, scanners, etc.) needed for research and class projects in the learning commons. Work with faculty to encourage out-of-class work in the library. Chances are that the library is open more hours than departmental labs and is more centrally located (plus we have blended librarians on duty who can help).

3. *Transform the reference desk.* Partner with information technology staff to create a technology and learning desk located within or in close proximity to the learning commons. This centralized, blended service point staffed with skilled student assistants, blended librarians, and IT staff can help students with a wide range of hardware and software issues, research questions, and provide impromptu hands-on learning opportunities.

4. *Recruit and develop bright and technologically savvy students to assist other students on the floor.* Peer mentors are key. Studies show that students will more often go to a

student assistant their own age than ask a librarian for help.

5. *Be available for one-on-one consultations and individual appointments, as opposed to sitting at a service desk waiting for students to come to you.* You have more important things to do than just sit there. Train student workers to refer complex or difficult questions to the professional librarian on duty. The "roving librarian" is another possibility. Periodically, the roving librarian can walk through the learning commons and notice what students are working on.

6. *Take the show on the road.* The learning commons is a perfect place for scheduled or impromptu instruction for small groups and individuals, but be willing to venture out of the library and meet with faculty and students on their home turf. Take the spirit of the learning commons and blended librarianship with you, and encourage student and faculty to come to the learning commons and meet with you for follow-up consultations.

7. *Develop online tutorials and guides that allow students and faculty to learn when they want to and at their own pace.* Embrace students' do-it-yourself/Web 2.0 spirit. If you give students the right tools, they may surprise you with their independence and creativity. Provide a way for students to collaborate with you and even develop new online guides for you.

Conclusion

Our campuses require us to be many things. We are expected to maintain many of our traditional services and build print collections (often with dwindling resources) while focusing on the latest technologies, media, and modes of research, teaching, and learning. This presents a challenge, but also exciting possibilities. Libraries and librarians are valued and respected because we are attune to the needs of students and faculty and concerned with their academic success. It is now up to us to respond to the needs of the next generation of learner.

We will continue to provide book collections and spaces for quiet study and reflection.
(continues on page 516)

as those with library consortia, may include both acquisitions and interlibrary lending agreements, which affect the need for and use of library space.

College libraries, with their unique strengths and histories, are in a strong position to continue their positive impact on teaching and learning by making appropriate changes in their physical spaces. Tracking trends in student learning, working across campus units to provide enhanced curricular support, and collaborating in consortial partnerships are only a few of the ways libraries can gain the information and support needed to meet the challenges of changing collections and spaces.

Notes

1. "Classification Descriptions," *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/ (accessed June 8, 2009).

2. Thomas A. Kirk, "College Libraries,"

Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science, edited by Miriam A. Drake, 2nd ed. (New York: Marcel Dekker, 2003), 591–601.

3. Evan Ira Farber, "Limiting College Library Growth: Bane or Boon?" *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 1:5 (1975): 12–15.

4. Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, "From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," *Change*, 17 (November/December 1995): 82–89.

Further reading

Bennett, Scott. *Libraries Designed for Learning*. Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2003.

Lewis, David W. "A Strategy for Academic Libraries in the First Quarter of the 21st Century." *College and Research Libraries* 68:5 (2007): 418–34.

Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space. Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2005. (continues on page 535)

(*The blended librarian . . .* continued from page 507)

tion, but we have the opportunity 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.

If libraries are to remain viable on our campuses we must reaffirm our place as learning centers for the exploration, and sharing of information, and the blended librarian is key to making this successful.

Notes

1. Stephen J. Bell and John Shank, "The Blended Librarian: A Blueprint for Redefining the Teaching and Learning Role of Academic Librarians," *College & Research Libraries News* 65, no. 7 (July/August 2004): 374.

2. Stephen J. Bell and John D. Shank, *Academic Librarianship by Design: A Blended Librarian's Guide to the Tools and Techniques* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2007): 1.

3. *Ibid.*, 20.

4. For a complete list see "Collaborative Learning Commons: Bibliography & Links," compiled by the author and available at <http://facstaff.unca.edu/sinclair/spaceplan/clcbib.html>.

5. Bryan Sinclair, "Commons 2.0: Library Spaces Designed for Collaborative Learning," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2007): 4–6, <http://connect.educause.edu/library/abstract/Commons20LibrarySpac/45534>.

6. For example, see Sarah Barbara Watstein and Stephen J. Bell, "Is There a Future for the Reference Desk? A Point-Counterpoint Discussion," *Reference Librarian* 49, no. 1 (2008): 1–20, and Jack O'Gorman and Barry Trott, "What Will Become of Reference in Academic and Public Libraries?" *Journal of Library Administration* 49 (2009): 327–39.

7. "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," ACRL, 2000; www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf. ❧