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The invertebrates scale of librarianship

Finding your niche

As a new academic librarian trying to establish myself and build relationships, I've been forced to give a fair amount of thought to what kind of librarian I want, and need, to be. Like many academic librarians, I have been trying to find the balance between being available for our faculty—supporting their (and their students') instruction needs and facilitating their research—and being a professional in my own right, advocating for myself and my expertise.

Many articles about the faculty-librarian relationship focus on faculty perceptions of librarians (or vice versa) and on the need for collaborative relationships. These are important aspects of academic librarianship to address, but they don't really speak to a significant contributing factor—librarians' perceptions of themselves and their role.

Yvonne Nalani Meulemans and Allison Carr called this issue out most clearly in their excellent article "Not at your service: Building genuine faculty-librarian partnerships." They contend that librarians should develop a strong sense of their professional selves, which will provide the bedrock on which to build a truly collaborative librarian-faculty relationship.¹

As I think about the practices Meulemans and Carr suggest, I have developed an irreverent, but helpful, way of conceptualizing my professional practice. I call it the Invertebrates Scale of Librarianship. The Invertebrates Scale was born out

of my supervisor's use of the metaphor of being a "jellyfish" for faculty—being willing to go along with just about any request. The Jellyfish Librarian has minimal structure and agency in their own right. They are easily carried along by the currents of their faculty's whims. In my wish to have faculty notice that I exist, ask for my help, and send students my way, I have often exhibited Jellyfish Librarian tendencies.

My inner jellyfish usually manifests as a willingness to take on an instruction session with minimal notice or direction. (No assignment? No time to plan? No problem. Any face time with students is worth it, right?) Meulemans and Carr address these tendencies and argue for a need for librarians to "cease being at the service of faculty," which may well entail "declin[ing] the aforementioned types of requests [such as asking the librarian to 'give the library talk'] . . . and instead question, engage, and converse with the faculty."²

The other end of the Invertebrates Scale is the Octopus Librarian. The Octopus Librarian has a huge amount of agency and self-direction, along with a strong core that never budes. Octopuses can squeeze into any number of improbable spaces,

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but they have a hard beak which can't be squished. (The Octopus Librarian is also almost certainly an excellent multitasker who may or may not have independent brains in each arm.)

Not every institution can handle the sudden appearance of an Octopus Librarian. Depending on the institutional structure and culture, the Octopus Librarian may rock the boat too much to be welcome for long. There may need to be a shift in faculty and administration mentality (possibly even a change in personnel) before the Octopus Librarian can thrive. Perceptions of librarians as lesser faculty, staff, or assistants by teaching/research faculty and administrators will be challenging for the Octopus Librarian (because they will be challenged by the Octopus Librarian).

The culture of librarianship itself often seems to push librarians toward the Jellyfish end of the spectrum. We are in this field (largely) because we like to help people, so it can be difficult to say “no”—particularly to a request that, while it may be problematic, is not actually objectionable. Indeed, the “we’ll make it work” mentality is almost a point of pride. We deserve to be proud of our ability to perform against the odds, but we should be cautious of making it the new norm. With that in mind, I’d like to introduce the midpoint of the Invertebrates Scale—the Nudibranch Librarian.

The Nudibranch Librarian is still pretty squishy and doesn’t take as many things into their own hands as the Octopus Librarian, but they are grounded and have more capacity for self-direction than the Jellyfish Librarian. The Nudibranch Librarian is neither an agency-less drifter nor a highly driven “mover and shaker.”

Meulemans and Carr advocate for librarians to develop a “professional value system,” which includes “articulating the philosophy and values that guide one’s professional practice.”³ They then suggest developing “professional ‘policies’ based on [librarians’] values. Determining what

one will or will not do prior to being contacted by a professor provides a clear course of action.” This is an ideal strategy for the Nudibranch Librarian. These “professional ‘policies’” will be the anchoring foot that prevents the Nudibranch from being swept away with the tide.

Now, the process of developing these “policies” and “professional value system” is not an easy one. Thinking through what kind of librarian I want to be is only the start (and it’s not easy). Actually putting my ideals into practice will be even more difficult. Developing personal policies will likely be as time-consuming and frustrating as developing new library policies. However, it’s a concrete step toward my personal aspiration to be more of a Nudibranch and less of a Jellyfish.

The Invertebrates Scale of Librarianship is intended to help librarians recognize and name their own professional tendencies. It is certainly not meant for disparagement of oneself or one’s colleagues. (Although I do hope that “you’re being kind of a Jellyfish right now” and similar phrases enter the librarian vernacular.) Nor is it meant as a statement that everyone must adopt a particular type of librarianship. The ocean is home to all of these creatures, and millions more, and each fills a niche in its ecosystem.

There will be times to be an Octopus, a Nudibranch, and a Jellyfish. Most of us will have a form that is more comfortable than the others. What’s appropriate is to recognize what that form is, how it helps and hinders, and whether a different form would be more suitable for a given situation.

Notes

1. Yvonne Nalani Meulemans and Allison Carr, “Not at Your Service: Building Genuine Faculty-Librarian Partnerships,” *Reference Services Review* 41, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1108/00907321311300893>.

2. *Ibid.*, 81.

3. *Ibid.*, 87. 