Academic Reference Librarians – Getting By With a Little Help From our (Special, Public, School, Law and Medical Librarian) Friends

Dianne Cmor
Hong Kong Baptist University Library

Purpose:
The purpose of this viewpoint paper is to consider how academic reference librarians might be guided by non-academic librarians as their roles shift and/or expand in a many different directions.

Design/Methodology/Approach:
Connections between the work of academic reference librarians and the work of public, special, school, law and medical librarians are drawn. Areas where expertise can be garnered are identified.

Findings:
Several relevant areas of expertise from non-academic library fields are identified as potentially useful to academic reference librarians, depending on the priorities of their individual institutions. As an example, the public library "service response" framework is applied to the academic library setting.

Practical implications:
As academic reference librarians are being asked to take on a wider range of roles on their campuses, this paper offers a possible framework for professional development.

Originality/value:
The future of academic reference librarians has not been viewed in light of adopting expertise from our colleagues in other types of libraries on such a broad scale, and with a view to create a suite of services best suited to individual environments.

Keywords:
Academic librarians; reference librarians; library management; professional development

Paper Type:
Viewpoint

Introduction

Recent trends in higher education indicate a shift (back) from specialization to general studies; and curriculum changes are focusing on enabling students to view issues and solve problems from multiple perspectives, not just from the perspective of their major. One of the oft-cited reasons for this shift is the "changing nature of the workplace" and the need for "creative problem solving, team work, and adaptability" (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2002, p.6), especially as people change jobs and careers more often in today's workplace. However, it is not only that people do not stay in the same job for thirty years anymore, but also that a job no longer stays the same for thirty years! Academic reference librarians, like our students these days, need to be able to step back and view issues from a perspective beyond their own comfortable areas of specialization.

Academic libraries have long taken advantage of the benefits of crossing departmental boundaries within their own walls, with cataloguers serving on reference desks, reference librarians serving on electronic access teams, systems librarians teaming with special collections librarians in digitizing treasures. But as new challenges and new opportunities continue to present themselves, it might be useful to look just a little farther afield – or more precisely, a little further within our own field.

This viewpoint paper will briefly highlight areas of expertise that our "disciplinary siblings" – special librarians, public librarians, school librarians, etc. – have developed over the years, that are particularly relevant to the key roles that academic reference librarians are increasingly playing in support of the teaching, learning and research activities on our campuses. By letting ourselves be guided by the knowledge and experience of our colleagues in various types of libraries, we might better be able to identify necessary questions, reshape our services in response to the current needs of our users and demands of our environments, and set our next course(s) of action.

Academic reference librarians are being asked to manage learning commons, partner on research teams, lead web 2.0 technology initiatives, support eLearning environments, build and support institutional repositories, develop general education curricula, assess student learning outcomes, define knowledge management needs/solutions, promote new modes of scholarly communication … and more. Given all of this, should we become more like special librarians, providing professional information services to faculty and administrators? Or more like public librarians, re-energizing the Library with vibrant community events? Will we finally have the opportunity to catch up with our school librarian counterparts with respect to integrating information literacy into the very fabric of learning? Can law librarianship provide some grounding as we struggle with the legal and ethical issues of information production, dissemination and use? Should we fashion ourselves after clinical, medical librarians and adopt "embedded librarian" approaches in departments, in classes, in research teams, in eLearning environments? So many questions, so many possibilities …

Should we "Special-ize"?
Academic reference librarians have long held dear the notion that our role is to teach users how to conduct library research, not to do it for them. As will be discussed later in this paper, this role is certainly central, but is it the only role that we can envision for ourselves? In the days of cost-per-minute online databases, searches were done for our users in academic libraries, much as special librarians today still do. Should we look to our special librarian colleagues and consider providing professional information services, not to students, but to faculty and administrators? Can we provide targeted literature reviews and alerting services for researchers, summary reports of hot topics for administrators, competitive intelligence, or knowledge management solutions?

As research assessment exercises and global competition amongst higher education institutions push such institutions to increase and highlight the quantity and quality of research outputs, a new role on research and institutional development teams is emerging for academic reference librarians. Librarians who are embedded in research teams are expected to understand needs and provide services that are responsive to the natural workflows of such teams (Bourg, 2009; Research Information Network, 2008). This might include providing environmental scans, literature reviews, information management solutions, grant writing and

publishing support, etc. Librarians, alone or in partnerships with others, might work on knowledge management strategies to ensure that institutional knowledge is captured and preserved. Such strategies might span the spectrum from capturing tacit knowledge within departments to storing large, complex datasets from eScience initiatives.

Special librarians have a wealth of experience in working closely with various types of project and research teams. Further, they are well versed in the creation/provision of various types of packaged information, which is not a familiar area for academic librarians. Research teams and administrative units in academic environments do not always want/need an instructional session – they more likely want/need an information professional to gather, interpret, analyze and present information succinctly in support of various projects. Applied scenarios from the Special Library Association's Competencies for Information Professionals of the 21st Century (2003) can easily be adapted to the higher education environment. For example, developing information packages for research teams at various stages might go beyond literature reviews to include compiling information on funding sources, business intelligence, industry monitors, etc. Services for administrative units might include providing regular summaries of special topics in higher education, or tracking and analyzing research outputs and impacts at institutional levels for annual reports or funding processes.

Should we "Public-ize"?
Should academic librarians become more like public librarians, re-energizing the Library as the intellectual centre of the campus, not with silent study areas, but with vibrant community events and debates in both the physical and virtual Commons? Without the "captive audience" that academic librarians have, how do public libraries attract users to their resources and services? How do public librarians gauge community needs and priorities; how do they change courses quickly if community needs shift suddenly in response to social, economic or political events?

On many campuses, librarians are being asked to re-conceptualize our physical spaces. In the age of electronic resources, library space is being reborn as learning space, redefined as a collaborative hub of ideas and conversations, and as a cornerstone of cultural exploration, intellectual discourse and civic responsibility. Public librarians have long been engaged in community programming – identifying current community needs and interests, and providing the social and physical infrastructure to support community growth and enrichment. Local community programming along with strong marketing to target groups is key to public library success. This can certainly apply to academic libraries – both physically and virtually. Websites, eLearning platforms, social networking spaces – all of these "places" would also benefit from strong community needs and targeted marketing perspectives.

Cultural advocacy is certainly one area where our public librarian counterparts might guide us. Literary readings, book clubs, art classes, lecture series, musical events, and community debates – these are all means by which we can actively engage in providing a broad-based, general education to our users. Willingham observes that some public libraries "reclaiming and expanding their civic mission" (2008, p.99). Not only are they providing space and facilitating public discourse, they are also engaging with their communities in solving problems. Following such a model, the Learning Commons in higher education settings might proactively offer its own community the opportunity to engage in institutional conversations and decision-making– again, both physically and virtually. We may wish to consider a "speaker's corner" in our library spaces, or hosting discussions and debates aimed

at providing a forum for institutional issues. Dewey speaks eloquently of "research libraries, renewed to their former beauty, can be a meeting place where scholars interact, not only with scholarship, but also with each other" (2009, p. 538). Public librarians could offer sage advice on how we in academic libraries could become skilled creators of events and environments in response to our communities' intellectual, cultural and social endeavours.

Should we "Legal –ize"? Should we Archive? Should we Revolutionize?

As the world of scholarly communication changes, our roles in promoting open access, assisting faculty in retaining intellectual property rights, managing open access repositories and publishing platforms have already begun to take shape. Scholarly communication is poised to explode in new directions as social networking and collaboration tools mature to a point where we will be capturing scholarly communication continuously throughout the research cycle, and vetting quality in new ways. A recent report from the Association of Research Libraries notes that given this change, librarians will need a deep understanding of knowledge creation processes, as it will no longer be separate from dissemination (Lowry, 2009, p. 9).

Can law librarianship provide some grounding as we struggle with the legal and ethical issues of information production, dissemination and use? In a world of new production and licensing models, expertise in understanding and interpreting copyright, licensing, publishing, digital rights management, CreativeCommons permissions, etc., is needed. Still, because we work for our users and not lawyers, we must be wary of providing advice that might be taken as legal advice. Law librarians might guide us both in our understanding of certain legal issues and in providing responsible services that are careful not to overstep professional boundaries.

Reference librarians have already taken on leading roles in developing and managing institutional repositories in an effort to archive and promote institutional research outputs. What about other institutional documents and data? Can we assist in developing, promoting and supporting knowledge management systems that act as archival repositories that go beyond research output repositories? How does this role overlap and/or intersect with that of the university archivist?

The service roles that we might play as scholarly communications experts go beyond understanding legal aspects or providing archival services. Academic reference librarians will be challenged to guide and educate faculty and students in new publishing models, not to mention models of knowledge dissemination that might not include the word "publishing" at all in the future. As mentioned above, social networking and the co-creation of knowledge will have revolutionary effects on the processes of scholarly communication. The Research Information Network (UK) advises higher education administrators to take advice from librarians about the implications of these changes that will come about as a result of these social networking activities. (Research Information Network, 2008, p. 9) There is an opportunity here for academic reference librarians to proactively seize upon a new role in creating and supporting a new communication paradigm, one that will have far-reaching implications on how research is undertaken, disseminated and used.

Should we Teach with New Intent?

Will the new General Education curricula provide the "tipping point" that the academic information literacy movement has been in need of, and help us to catch up with our school librarian counterparts in this crucial area? How do things like search tool business interests and community-created content provide us with new directions as information experts/scholars in higher education? Can we lecture not just on "searching", but on the social, economic and philosophical implications of information? Should we embrace our natural role as technology trainers, with a keen eye to helping our users engage with new technology in creative, innovative ways?

A long history of providing teaching and learning *support* to faculty is now opening up to a more fulsome *partnership* with individual faculty members, with departments, and with curriculum committees looking to provide and assess the 21st century skills that are being sought after by graduate schools and workplace environments. Beyond information searching and evaluation, a pedagogical focus on problem-solving set alongside a web 2.0 culture of co-construction, provides librarians with an opportunity to engage in questions of information use and knowledge creation in new and exciting ways. Academic librarians are becoming increasingly embedded in teaching and learning processes on campuses – in classrooms, in eLearning environments, in curriculum committees, in conversations both inside and outside of the library. We are also being asked to seriously and programmatically assess student learning in areas of information literacy, technology and critical thinking.

Our colleagues in school libraries can provide considerable expertise and guidance for our instructional endeavours, especially in relation to holistic information literacy outcomes. Looking at the American Association of School Librarians "Standards for the 21st Century Learner" or the Hong Kong Education Bureau's "Information Literacy Framework for Hong Kong Students", there are many areas which seem to be more developed in the school library field than in academic libraries. For example, these documents include discussion and strategies with regard to inquiry as a framework for learning, the social context of learning, affective and meta-cognitive dimensions, and the need for multiple literacies (American Association of School Librarians, 2009; Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005).

In the area of technology training, with a well-earned reputation as early adopters of technology, reference librarians have provided training and advice to our users for many years. Most recently, many of us are providing training for Web 2.0 tools, supporting eLearning platforms, and engaging users in virtual worlds such as Second Life – all from both a technical and a pedagogical stance. Helping users to understand the newest information technologies and engaging them in conversations that facilitate the identification of new means of using such technologies in their teaching, learning and research is a natural role that we might consider embracing more proactively. The latest Horizon Reports, for example, posit that the technologies to watch in higher education settings include mobiles, open content, cloud computing, geo-encoded data, semantic-aware applications, eBook devices, etc. (Johnson, 2009; 2010) If reference librarians are well positioned to understand both new technologies and existing/changing user workflows, technology leader/mentor is a role that our users might want us to proactively embrace.

Should we Embed with Abandon?
As many resources are no longer tied to our buildings, reference librarians must be ready and willing to venture outside of the safe walls of the library, and engage with users where they

work. Should we become more like clinical, medical librarians and adopt "embedded librarian" approaches in departments, in classes, in research teams, in eLearning environments? How might the experience of our medical librarian colleagues assist us in integrating ourselves into research teams or curriculum committees? Medical librarians have a long history of the "embedded librarian" model in clinical librarian programs, and have established integral roles on research teams in relation to evidence-based medicine and systematic reviews of the literature. Along with clinical librarians, special librarians would also have experience and expertise to offer in this area, as they are often physically situated amongst their user group.

It is only by experiencing first-hand the workflows, information needs, and information behaviours of our users that we can truly provide value-added services, not just those services that we believe to be valuable. With offices alongside faculty offices, would our services become both more responsive and more proactive? Kesselman and Watstein argue "embedded librarianship is one of the prime tenets of a user-centered library" (2009, p.385). Johnson and Alexander discuss "field librarianship" in the context of moving librarian offices into departments in support of teaching, research and technology (instructional and otherwise) (2008, p.27). The "importance of proximity" coupled with the fact that a field librarian's field is not librarianship but the departmental field is key (Johnson and Alexander, 2008, p.31). The Research Information Network's report "Ensuring a bright future for research libraries" suggest many new roles that would require close collaboration with researchers such as "developing innovative services that integrate into researchers' workflows the discovery of, and access to, relevant information resources" (2008, p.7). The report clearly recommends the "embedding of library or information professionals in research teams" and such services should be built into "the costings for all research activities and projects" (Research Information Network, 2008, p.8). It is becoming an accepted premise that embedded librarians do not merely support instructional or research teams, but are integral members of such teams (Kesselman and Watstein, 2009, p.387).

With respect to teaching and learning, we know that "embedding" ourselves in curriculum teams allows us to better identify and support information needs, but should we be more actively embedded in classrooms and eLearning environments? Beyond providing resources, guides and occasional instruction, becoming more active players in the classroom may serve a useful purpose. Actively engaging in online class discussions could allow us to show students where and how judicious use of information is key to critical thinking and problem solving. Partnering with faculty to deliver full courses could provide us a different perspective on both student and faculty needs, attitudes and behaviours, allowing us to expand our role in ways we might not have known were needed.

Beyond embedding ourselves in courseware, how can we embed more effectively in the online environment as a whole? We mustn't forget that our service models are on the verge, if not already there, of becoming models that require both a physical and a virtual presence. Building and/or supporting collaborative environments based on user needs, even simple environments such as group-based wikis, might provide another path of embedding ourselves into the workflow and discourse of our users.

Should we reinforce our own strengths?
In scanning the environments of our siblings in other types of libraries, we should not forsake areas of own expertise, and we should ensure that this expertise is current, forward-thinking,

and responsive to the changing needs of our users. What liaison librarian services are needed in today's higher education environment? Should we focus our energies on developing and/or facilitating new modes of scholarly communication? How can our knowledge of information in all disciplines best support current interests in multi/inter-disciplinary teaching, learning and research? Could our knowledge of user behaviour be put to better use in the back room of systems development?

Though this paper looks to programs in non-academic libraries for inspiration and guidance, we must also ensure that we are responding to and participating in the innovative thinking that is occurring in our own sandboxes. Academic science librarians are forging ahead with ways to develop and support eScience. Liaison librarians are going beyond the "holy trinity" of collection development, reference and instruction by providing services in support of scholarly communication, digital tools, and community outreach (Williams, 2009, p.4). New expert positions as scholarly communications librarians are becoming more and more common in direct response to the changes in this area.

Building support into information systems that respond to user behaviours is an area of "virtual reference" in which academic reference librarians might want to focus more attention. Veldoff refers to "safety nets" and Electronic Performance Support Systems, wherein tips are built into navigation and search menus, as one easy way to integrate embedded help into library websites and systems (2008, p.124). Perhaps our finely tuned reference interview skills can be put to better use in virtual environments with sophisticated embedded help systems, than on low usage reference desks. In a time of stretched human resources, services might best be provided in a more automated manner.

Should we, Could we, Would we …. ?
Most reference librarians (generalists at heart) would love to be able to do all of the exciting things that our very vibrant profession affords. But can we be all things to all people with no budget/human resource increases in sight? Can we commit to big, exciting projects like implementing a vibrant Learning Commons, embedding librarians in intensive research terms, leading a revolution in scholarly communication practices, teaching full courses that stretch us beyond search/evaluation topics, etc., without committing to changing some of our current practices?

Within the contexts of each individual library/institution, decisions with regard to breadth and depth are needed – sometimes difficult decisions about what we will *not/no longer* undertake (e.g. reference desks, the multitude of first year workshops, detailed user guides …). The 2008 Ithaka report challenges libraries to acknowledge "which traditional roles are no longer needed and which potential roles would be valued, and strategically shift their service offerings to maximize their value to local users" (Housewright and Schonfeld, 2008, p. 4). Neal boldly asserts:

> We should not be asking if individual units can absorb financial hits but whether those units should exist or, at the very least, whether or not those units provide value-added services to our communities. We should be looking for opportunities to take wide swaths of money out of certain areas of our budgets to give us the resources necessary to invest in new strategically important areas.
>
> (Neal, 2009, p.555)

The question remains – which of the many important areas should we fund? Local users are the key to good decision making in the service arena. If we accept that services must be constantly driven by user needs, and we acknowledge that user needs are many and varied and ever-expanding in different directions, how can academic reference librarians respond with some measure of (and hope of retaining) sanity?

Perhaps our disciplinary siblings in public libraries have a service framework that might be useful to us – one that is responsive, flexible and actionable.

Services Responses – A Public Library Framework in Academic Libraries
 "Services responses" from public library practice might be very useful in assisting academic libraries to articulate possible roles and in deciding which ones to adopt over time, or at different points in time. The service response framework, developed by the Public Library Association (PLA), recognizes that libraries cannot offer all of the services that users may want or need. Given that, it provides a framework whereby significant services responses are identified on a broad scale, and individual libraries can choose the best mix of responses that fits that local environment at that given time (Garcia and Nelson, 2009).

According to Garcia and Nelson, a service response is "what a library does for, or offers to, the public in an effort to meet a set of well-defined community needs" (2009, p.1). They make clear that adding services only when additional resources are available is not desirable or feasible; instead all services must be reviewed regularly to ensure they are aligned with current priorities, and resources must be reallocated in order to respond to shifting grounds (Garcia and Nelson, 2009, p.10). Currently, the PLA has 18 service responses from which to choose, each with target audiences and a list of supporting activities. The service responses are formulated from a user perspective such that they urge us to "respond" to what a user wants to "do". For example, in public libraries users may want to:

> Discover your roots
> Build successful enterprises
> Connect to the online world
> Learn to read and write
> Make career choices

What would the possible service responses in today's academic libraries be at a broad, philosophical level? Which ones will be deemed a priority in your library? As a starting point for discussion, how about the following:

> Succeed in learning; learn for success
> Think critically, globally & responsibly
> Stimulate & satisfy curiosity
> Collaborate with peers, physically & virtually
> Make new discoveries; create new things
> Share knowledge, widely & quickly
> Participate in the community
> Work efficiently, using best tools available
> Be knowledgeable in my field; informed in other fields

What activities would best support any given service response? Selecting an appropriate mix of service responses based on institutional goals and priorities, leads to choosing which activities should be undertaken and resourced. As some of our service responses may remain steady, and others may come and go with the ebb and flow of institutional priorities, we will need to consider which areas are core, which areas we can pick up and leave aside as needed, and which areas might best be outsourced or contracted for a period of time.

If one were to adopt the overall premise of this paper, once service responses are decided, we can then consult with our disciplinary siblings (in person or via the literature), where appropriate, to help guide our questions and our choices about supporting activities, and to consider ways in which these activities are best implemented.

Conclusion

Like today's higher education students, academic reference librarians must learn to think beyond our own "major", and consider problems from perspectives outside of our own. While still valuing and developing our own areas of expertise, opening our minds and our libraries to the expertise of our colleagues from farther afield will assist us in making choices wisely and adapting quickly to our ever-changing campus environments.

As academic libraries move from "a collection-centered model to an engagement-centered one" (Williams, 2009, p.3), the role of the academic reference librarian is no longer one that merely supports the use of that collection, but one that reaches out to users in responsive and innovative ways. The benefit of thinking broadly, of being able to see connections across branches of the profession and use a variety of methodologies to solve a problem, is not that we will all offer the *same* academic library to our unique institutions, but that we can offer the library that is most needed, and that is flexible over time. Being a little more like a special library this year, a little more like a public library next year, keeping an open mind, an adventurous spirit, and a receptive attitude.

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