



President's Column

Molly Raphael

The Transformational Power of Libraries in Tough Economic Times

It's really been quite remarkable to see how frequently libraries have been in the news lately. We are accustomed to the library stories that hit the news during tough economic times: layoffs, hour reductions, cuts in programs and materials budgets, and even closings. These stories have always seemed so unfortunate since we know from history that library use climbs significantly during hard economic times. I remember learning about record use during the Great Depression and then experiencing the same trends during the recessions of the past several decades.

What we are seeing in the news now is not just the cut-back stories but also a wave of stories in the national and local media about the transformational roles libraries are playing by providing essential services to help people cope with their economic challenges. Even media such as the *Wall Street Journal* and national broadcast evening news programs are talking about libraries and how they have provided critical services for people looking for employment or managing their finances. Librarians and library staff are portrayed as key players in helping people use the Internet and other resources for very practical uses that are capable of transforming their daily lives.

There are examples that probably all of you could cite. Briefly, here are a few that happened here and are probably typical:

- A woman, who had recently lost her job as a housekeeper for a company, walked into one of our branch libraries. She had found an opening for the same kind of work at Macy's, but she had to fill out a 23-page application (!) on line. She had no idea how to use a computer, but someone sent her the library because of our public access computers. With the help of our staff, she completed the application and got the job.
- A recently laid-off, elderly man had taken several computer courses at the library so that he could fill out his

reports to continue to get unemployment checks and search for work. He is an immigrant and seems to have had a professional career that he has not been able to continue here. He is not able to retire and knows that his livelihood depends on his being able to use computers.

- A couple that needed debt counseling signed up at one of the library computers with the help of library staff. The employee helped the couple figure out what additional information they would need to continue with their application.

These are just three examples of the ways libraries are transforming lives in their communities. My view may be from the public library, but it is not hard to imagine how academic and school libraries are experiencing similar situations in supporting their customers. A recent article in the *New York Times* focused on how "school librarians increasingly teach students crucial skills needed not only in school, but also on the job and in daily life."¹

As we continue to make our case for funding to the governing bodies of our institutions, it is truly wonderful to have the media helping us. Indeed, the recent OCLC study, *From Awareness to Funding: a Study of Library Support in America*, found:

- Perceptions of librarians are an important predictor of library funding support
- Voters who see the library as a 'transformational' force as opposed to an 'informational' source are more likely to increase taxes in its support

With the media describing the transformational role that librarians and libraries are playing in people's lives, we can be grateful that our message is being carried by powerful voices that do not come from the library community. ALA's new advocacy toolkit for tough economic times provides ideas and tools for making those transformational arguments (<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/advocacy/advocacyuniversity/toolkit/index.cfm>). We can continue to build this vision of the transformational power of libraries by learning from each other and sharing our successes.

This column is my last one as LLAMA president, and

continued on page 151

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we can partner? Are layoffs the only response to budgets too low to support the current number of employees? Is the budget the only source of funding for a new service in demand?

Specifically, where is the real point of resistance to a more reasonable budget? Is it the mayor? What power might the library have in relation to the mayor? How many staff are politically involved? How many who voted for him campaigned for him? When is the next election? Another example relates to partners: Where in the university's community is there an organization facing demands for a new service similar to the demands on the library and where a pooling of skills and resources can bring costs down?

We have much more power to affect things that seem beyond our control than we think. The power is real! Our challenge is finding where the power lies. The things we deal with every day are not limited in their relationships to what occurs within the library. Each has multiple relationships outside the library, one or more of which may provide power to affect the process in favor of the library. A means for identifying the location of the relationships amenable to our influence is what is needed.

Planning tools such as strategic planning and environmental surveillance are valuable but limited. They are one-time activities, and often we perceive the planning sphere as limited in one way or another. What is needed is a different way of thinking. Since reality is a never-ending set of relationships, we need a way of thinking that can see these relationships. We need to become "systems thinkers" so we can find all the sources of the power we have to use to improve our circumstances.

"Systems thinking" is seeing wholes. According to Peter Senge in his *The Fifth Discipline*, it is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than snapshots. It is being aware that whatever we do is related to a much broader range of individuals and elements than at first appears. It is a habit, a habit opposite our common habit of recognizing a problem, looking for a solution in the immediate factors,

and moving quickly to solve the problem. It is understanding relationships, especially understanding the fluidity of relationships. It is about recognizing points of greatest leverage.¹

Looking at systems thinking from the point of view of the power it brings can help one invest time and commitment to developing the habit of thinking in terms of relationships and patterns instead of our more common method of accepting what first comes to mind and acting. And habit it is. Systems thinking is not just a new strategy for planning or analysis. It is not a better technique for allocating resources. It is not a new managerial method to be understood and adopted. Systems thinking is not a topic of a training session where we learn about a different way to work. It is a habit—a new way of habitual thinking.

Since systems thinking is a habit, adopting it requires the behavior required for developing any new habit: (1) recognizing that the current habit is inadequate and being willing to give it up, (2) discovering and then learning a more effective behavior, and (3) practicing the new behavior until it becomes usual and automatic. When the time comes that frustration after frustration leads a manager to recognize that current usual ways of thinking are inadequate, the first of these requirements will be met. The power available in systems thinking is only one argument for its effectiveness. The hard part is the repetition; it means a commitment strong enough to accept the time it will take to become a systems thinker.

One method for introducing systems thinking is the dialogue/discussion model for meetings described in this column in the Summer 2008 issue, and more extensively in Peter Senge's. Another method is to develop the practice of avoiding quick answers in meetings, discussions, and conversations; always ask one more question.

References

1. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994): 67-73.

President's Column *continued from page 106*

I wanted to thank you again for the opportunity to serve. The year has been fun and challenging, full of new opportunities to learn. I am looking forward to seeing many of you in Chicago in July for the ALA Annual Conference. LLAMA's committees and sections have planned a wonderfully rich panoply of learning opportunities through eight pre-conferences and fifteen programs. Check the LLAMA website for details: <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/llama/llama.cfm> I especially hope that you will be able to join us for the LLAMA President's Program on Sunday, July 12, at 1:30 to hear Patricia Martin ([\[.patricia-martin.com/\]\(http://blog.patricia-martin.com/\)\) talk about the RenGen, the new cultural consumer, and the relevance for libraries. The conference promises so many opportunities to be inspired, to learn, and to connect with colleagues. Don't miss it!](http://blog</p></div><div data-bbox=)

References

1. Motoko Rich, "The Future of Reading: In Web Age, Library Job Gets Update." *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 2009.