

## Literature of Research or Literature of Practice?

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### Another commentary about change – so what?

After years of almost constant change, I expect that we are all somewhat resigned to it (and no doubt a little tired of talking about it). It is obvious that change has actually become a permanent and defining factor of our profession. Of late, change had been driven less by technology and more by economic concerns but it has been no less compelling. It has hit many libraries particularly hard because, as a public good, they are generally publically funded through taxes, tuition or bonds and thus, accountable to their patrons and taxpayers in a very visible way. With the trend to reduce government spending and public programs, libraries have to do more with less.

In the past, as a profession, we have been reactive to these changes, allowing circumstances and other parties to dictate who we are and what we value in our practice; recently, there is more direction and intentionality about the evolution of libraries operations. Many libraries have transformed their resources and structure to be more responsive to their patrons and to innovate our services to take advantage of the technology.

### Is scholarship evolving?

While operationally there are many innovative efforts, from a scholarly perspective, we are still struggling to find our way. We are challenged to align the changes in the work that we do and celebrate the innovations in the services that we provide, with the efforts to further the scholarship and disseminate the research. Ideally, research and publication reflect the values of our profession, through content, medium and practice. In other words, while libraries and librarians are doing innovative things and pushing services and library practice forward, our venues for scholarly publications have tended to retain the same traditional standards and expectations of abstract explorations and methods-based approaches, which have not evolved with practice. Although these traditional standards have brought scholarly rigor to the profession, they have not changed to identify the best practices and the innovations for the benefit of practitioners in the profession and to communicate our successes to our various constituencies. It may be that this dichotomy is indicative of the “neither-fish-nor-foul” nature of librarians, particularly faculty librarians, who are expected to research and publish. However, as a profession, we do ourselves a disservice in terms of how we define and value our scholarship.

### Is Open Access helping to change scholarship?

There are areas where scholarship is starting to reflect the values of the profession. Librarians have been major proponents of scholarly communication and open access for years, advocating free flow of information and a shift away from the commercial publishing model. This has been indicated practically by web-based publications and blogs popping up to compete with the more traditional publishing venues. It is only recently that established, peer-reviewed journals have shifted from a membership- or publisher-access model to an open access model. Our leading association, ALA, is also advocating these efforts as more of their division journals move to open access models: first *Library Leadership & Management*, then *Information Technology & Libraries* and others are considering this move. So on an organizational level, there are efforts to align our values and practice with our scholarship and publishing, through professional venues.

### **Are organizations supportive of scholarship?**

While many libraries have initiatives and efforts to advocate and support open access organizationally, how they value and reward their librarians for scholarship is quite a separate issue. Generally (and there are exceptions to this), public librarians, school librarians and others may not have their scholarship recognized at all by their organizations while librarians in higher education may, in fact, have fundamental expectations for research and publication. The changes in library practice are also being felt in these expectations and in academia itself. Tenure, that construct which was intended to protect academic (and intellectual) freedom, is also being widely rethought (and not just in libraries). Academic libraries with tenure track systems are starting to examine the ways in which they acknowledge contributions to the profession, how they reward research and professional effort. There is recognition that it may not be consistent with what we value as a profession or even, more startlingly, with what most of us spend our time doing every day.

### **So why do librarians publish?**

Librarians research and extend knowledge as a fundamental facet and value of our profession. In our practice, we are working to promote understanding and disseminate knowledge for the benefit of our patrons, be they faculty, students or entire programs or disciplines, etc. These efforts may, or may not, be written up and published, depending on the merits, innovation and success of the project. Many librarians are also researchers in their own right and have developed a specialized expertise, recognized through publications and presentations. However, these are a select few and there are many innovative projects and services, which would help establish new directions and best practices for the profession that do not get written up. So, the question to ask may be – why don't librarians publish?

There is no end of reasons (although some might call them excuses) for why excellent practitioners and researchers don't publish their findings and innovations:

- I am too busy doing my job.
- I don't get release time to write.

- There is no incentive to publish; merit is only based on my job performance.
- It is my job to further the scholarship and understanding of my patrons; not write myself.
- The scholarship doesn't actually help anyone do their job. It doesn't actually help the profession.
- I don't know how to write or where to start to get something published.
- The only people who read articles in librarianship are MLS students.
- Scholarly articles take too long to publish and are too dependent on the whims of an editor.
- Journals aren't interested in what I am doing.

For whatever reason, there is a large portion of the profession that has a lot of expertise but doesn't engage in disseminating their own knowledge to their profession. We are missing out on a lot of experience and shared knowledge.

In editorial circles and tenure discussions, there is a tendency derision to dismiss or speak derisively about articles that talk about "how we done it good." The interesting factor is that the majority of practicing librarians would be well-served by such articles, practical and innovative ideas, scholarship that identifies best practices and the principles or methodology behind them that will help them transform their own services. In addition, there is definitely some merit in publishing "how we really messed up" articles, to gain a better understanding of why a project didn't work and what the pitfalls were so that others might avoid these failures.

The two types of literature (scholarly and practical) have historically been treated as mutually exclusive, having their own benefits and proponents. However, it is possible to bring peer review and scholarly rigor to the practice of librarianship and in some ways, it has been around for a long time. LLAMA has worked to identify best practices and bring scholarly rigor to practice through award programs such as the John Cotton Dana Awards, recognizing marketing and public relations in libraries, and the LLAMA ALA/AIA Building Awards, identifying new and innovative trends in facilities.

We, as professionals, need to decide who we are, what we do and what we value. Our activities should reflect these values including the ways in which represent ourselves and our efforts (in practice and in research and publication) and acknowledge our success and our impact.

I will close with a question for all the professionals with significant roles to play - practitioners and educators, authors and researchers, editors and reviewers, managers and leaders -

**How do we really transform the literature so that it highlights the best of practice, the profession and who we are?**

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