

Deconstructing Reorganizations in Libraries

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Deconstruction is a philosophical method that attempts to illuminate the operation of hierarchies and established methods of understanding by revealing their often-unrecognized reliance on language. As developed by Jacques Derrida in his 1967 work *Of Grammatology*, deconstructive analysis emphasizes the slipperiness and multiplicity of language, undermining the authority of established ways of knowing and doing, and questioning the very possibility of a stable Truth.¹ Accepting this as a prerequisite for the evaluation of a text or event allows one to develop new ways of thinking and thus new solutions to accepted ways of proceeding. Deconstructive analysis has also been applied more broadly as a method by which the incoherence of a position can be demonstrated. In particular, Michel Foucault uses deconstructive analysis to explain and understand order and power.^{2 3} Deconstructing the motivations for library reorganizations as a means to understand them better can also help make library administrators more aware of alternative ideas and perspectives, particularly those held by other library stakeholders.

Reorganizations of libraries have become more frequent as administrators manage the many opportunities and challenges confronting libraries today. Deciding how to best use emerging technologies, cuts in collection and personnel budgets, lack of building space – or the addition of new library space - are but a few of the reasons reorganizations are undertaken. The deconstructionist would point out that it is important to remember that reorganizations never ultimately mean what the administration (or anyone else) says they mean. Motivations and outcomes of reorganizations of libraries must be interpreted and understood by each person affected in their own way, and all of their perspectives must be considered. Since all stakeholders will be affected by the reorganization, they should all be represented in the plan to reorganize, or at least be afforded the opportunity to make their perspective known.

Library reorganizations are a frequent topic of articles in the professional literature. Champieux, Jackson, and Carrico write that libraries are in a constant state of reorganization, noting that “emerging technologies, a proliferation of formats, budget reallocations, and shifting goals and strategies have necessitated continuous change and, hopefully, improvement.”⁴ It is indeed necessary to continuously consider departmental and/or library-wide reorganizations to keep pace with the rapidly changing library environment. The process can be difficult, as library stakeholders – and particularly the institutions in which they work – are often resistant to change. It is essential that this be recognized when undertaking reorganizations by involving stakeholders in decisions that will affect them. As Champeix et al note, “...it must be a participatory process with open lines of communication between library administration, supervisors, and staff.”⁵ This perspective is echoed by Fitch, Thomason, and Wells, who apply the concepts of total quality management to their analysis of the reorganization of Stanford’s

Davis Library. They write that consultants brought in to plan the reorganization noted persistent discontent and frustration among library employees. Their solution was to refer “the idea of reorganization to a team composed of the entire professional staff of the Library.”⁶ This team eventually grew to include the support staff, as they “realized the importance of empowering everyone.”⁷ This move created an environment that helped assure the success of the reorganization because all of the stakeholders in the process had a voice in creating the outcome. By taking ownership of the process, the employees gained a stake in making it work.

A frequent issue in the professional literature discussing library reorganizations is the anxiety felt by employees who felt that they would have to change assignments that they had spent years learning, or perhaps even be dismissed from their jobs. Barbara Fister believes that the retraining and restructuring of library personnel must be constant, and not just during reorganizations, noting “if we had to hire new people in libraries because job descriptions changed, we’d be hiring an entirely new staff every six months.”⁸ Fister further observes that library positions are “a set of interconnected and flexible responsibilities woven together to meet the library’s goals.”⁹ Re-imagining these connections and offering constant training and re-training for staff to address emerging needs are indispensable to effective library operations. When launching library reorganizations, the staff must be actively engaged, as it is they who perform the multitude of tasks necessary for effective library operations and have intense knowledge of their daily assignments.

Focusing on the ethics of how personnel changes are carried out is essential when considering library re-organizations. In writing about a restructuring at the University of Arizona libraries, Andrade and Zaghloul note that Arizona has a “longstanding policy of handling budget cuts by eliminating vacant positions or budget lines rather than laying people off.”¹⁰ Fitch, Thomason, and Wells recognize the need to assure library employees affected by reorganizations as well, writing that “all professional and support staff members were assured repeatedly that they would have positions in the new organization, and that no one would be dismissed as a result of the reorganization process.”¹¹

The administrators of the library reorganizations described above employed the concepts of deconstruction because they came to realize that there was no stable truth as declared by consultants or their own pre-determined ideas of how the reorganizations should occur. They came to accept that top-down decision making was ultimately ineffective, as this model would not consider library stakeholders in the reorganizations.

When administering reorganizations, it is important to be mindful of the impact it will have on those being reorganized. Gini writes of the importance of a moral imagination, i.e., being cognizant of the consequences of one’s choices on others. He writes that “Ethical decision making requires us to look beyond the immediate moment and beyond personal needs, desires, and wants to imagine the possible consequences of our choices and behavior on self and others.”¹² In his recent book *Seven Management Moralities*, Thomas Klikauer writes of the need for managers to remain constantly aware of the false notion that managerial authority outweighs all other considerations. He writes “Most disturbingly, uncritical and unreflective acceptance of the managerial status quo, the managerial prerogative, and the right to manage

can blind it to just how morally wrong some of management's behaviours and even its very own institutional setups are." ¹³ Reorganizations are more about people than processes, and it is essential that the stakeholders not only have a voice in the decision making, but also assurances that their livelihoods are secure. Without these assurances, a successful and effective reorganization will be very difficult to attain.

As reorganizational plans are developed, those doing the planning grow eager to put the reorganization into place, often leaving out a thorough review of the consequences to those being reorganized. As Weitzner observes, "Ethics and action are indistinguishable precisely because all the time in the world would not be enough to meet the responsibility of thinking before acting." ¹⁴ Most library administrators have arrived at their positions precisely because they have demonstrated the ability to take action. This trait is good and necessary, but it must be tempered with a consciousness of the effects of administrative decisions on employees. The pursuit of efficiency does not free administrators from their responsibility for the professional wellness of those whom they supervise.

Eminent poet and essayist Audre Lorde has observed, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." ¹⁵ Library reorganizations done in a top-down manner, even with the best of intentions, will reflect only administrative priorities because their tools can only be used to strengthen their position. Reorganizations done solely for administrative prerogatives necessarily must exclude, suppress, and obscure counter-truths, thus treating the provisional motivations of administrative action as permanent realities. For real innovation to occur, new tools must be found by reaching into the minds, perspectives, and motivations of the stakeholders – librarians, staff, students, and patrons - in the reorganization.

Library reorganizations are essentially re-constructions of personnel, policies, and procedures, and the ways in which they interact. After reorganizations, library administrators must restore and improve intangibles such as efficiency and responsiveness within the newly re-constructed organization. Most importantly, the library administrator must restore trust, particularly among those stakeholders who feel – correctly or incorrectly – that they had no input into the process. People tend to trust those that engage them in real dialogue. One hopes to achieve a post-deconstructive ideal of communication that acknowledges that there is no absolute authority, and recognizes the importance of promoting an environment in which ongoing and respectful communication occurs among all library stakeholders.

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Notes

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

³ Michel Foucault, *Power* (New York: The New Press, 2000)

⁴ R. Champieux, M. Jackson, & S. Carrico, "Implementing change and reorganization in the acquisitions departments at the University of Alabama and the University of Florida", *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances*, 21, no. 4 (2008) 113.

⁵ Ibid, 120.

⁶ D.K. Fitch, J Thomason, & E.C. Wells, "Turning the Library Upside Down: Reorganization Using Total Quality Management Principles", *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 19, no. 5 (1993) 294.

⁷ Ibid, 295.

⁸ Barbara Fister, "You are Not a Tinker Toy: Libraries and Reorganization," *Inside Higher Ed* (27 Sept 2011).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ R. Andrade & R. Zaghloul, "Restructuring liaison librarian teams at the University of Arizona Libraries, 2007-2009", *New Library World*, 111, no. 7/8 (2010) 276.

¹¹ D.K. Fitch, J. Thomason, & E.C. Wells, "Turning the Library Upside Down: Reorganization Using Total Quality Management Principles", *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 19, no. 5 (1993) 297.

¹² A. Gini, "A Short Primer on Moral Courage", IN *Moral Courage in Organizations*, D.R. Comer & G. Vega, editors (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 6.

¹³ T. Klikauer, *Seven Management Moralities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 2.

¹⁴ D. Weitzner, "Deconstruction Revisited: Implications of Theory over Methodology", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 16, no. 1 (2007) 46.

¹⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984).