

# The blended librarian

## A blueprint for redefining the teaching and learning role of academic librarians

by Steven J. Bell and John Shank

*"The future of the library is that there is no library; the functions that the library performs have been blown up and are scattered throughout the universe."<sup>1</sup>*

### The state of academic librarianship

Academic librarianship is at a critical professional juncture. There is growing ambiguity about our professional role and where our future lies in the academic enterprise during this period of tumultuous change. As a profession we are struggling with ways to harness and weave new technologies into our existing fabric of high-quality information service delivery. As the wants and needs of our end users transform, librarians have sought to redefine what the library building and our services mean to our communities. And as the nature of the content librarians work with dramatically re-structures, our profession has experimented with new ideas for its capture, organization, and delivery. All of this change is happening in a new, increasingly competitive information environment in which the academic library no longer is the de facto resource of first choice for those it exists to serve.

The quote with which we chose to begin this document comes from the Outsell, Inc. s

Outlook 2004: Issues in the Information Marketplace. Whether or not you agree with the accuracy or intent of this statement, it provides an inspirational challenge to academic librarians as well as a call for a new vision. If the future is one in which there is no library—or at least the library that exists as our traditional communal paradigm of what an academic library is supposed to be—then this is the perfect time for our profession to transform the academic library and the role of the academic librarian.

### The marginalization of the academic library

While it may be sublimely absurd to some of our colleagues to even validate the Outsell quote, the rationale that it needs thoughtful consideration is based on observations on the marginalization of the academic library. Consider the following:

Ubiquitous courseware systems allow faculty to create information silos that serve as gateways to all course-related information, including research sources that may or may not include the campus library.

Textbook publishers are moving to incorporate traditional library database content into Web sites that are companion tools for students as they use the text.

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### About the authors

Stephen J. Bell is director of the Paul J. Gutman Library at Philadelphia University, e-mail: bells@philau.edu and John Shank, is head of Instructional Design Services and instructional design librarian at Penn State Berks – Lehigh Valley College, e-mail: Jds30@psu.edu

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Google! Need more be said?

Radical transformation in scholarly publishing is creating new avenues by which scholars make their research available, potentially heralding the demise of traditional journals upon which our collections are based, and throwing into question whether libraries will continue to serve as the primary conduit for scholarly literature.

Personalized subscription databases are being marketed to individuals as an alternative to existing libraries. Questia has struggled to make this concept viable, but it's only a matter of time until a better model evolves.

Amazon and Google book searching, despite their inadequacies, become immensely popular almost immediately, receive tremendous media adulation, and make libraries, despite our technology, seem old and shop-worn.

The Googleization phenomena, in which librarians and database producers are driving a movement to make our systems emulate Google, makes us look desperate and fearful that our days of teaching end users to develop efficient research skills are over.

Microsoft is pursuing and creating partnerships with all of our traditional information vendors for direct linkages from their ubiquitous Office software to full-text database content that will allow end-users to bypass our libraries with the click of a mouse button.

Given the potential of these external forces to marginalize the librarian's role in higher education, this article seeks to communicate an essential framework for reinventing the role of the academic librarian in higher education. It is imperative and no exaggeration to claim that the future of academic librarianship depends on our collective ability to integrate services and practices into the teaching and learning process.

While the evolution of information literacy is a positive sign, the academic librarian is still largely tangential to what happens in or beyond the classroom. Strategies, techniques and skills are needed that will allow all academic librarians, from every sector of the library organization, to proactively advance their integration into the teaching and learning process. The framework envisioned depends largely upon the ability to collaborate with faculty, but also other campus information and

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instructional technologists. This framework is best expressed as the blended librarian.

### **What is a blended librarian?**

Technology has transformed higher education. The use of information technologies and computing to both support and deliver instruction has become widespread and continues to serve as an almost universal disruptive force at colleges and universities. Academic librarianship has excelled at grasping the significance and potential of technology as a powerful force in transforming our profession and what we contribute to higher education. Librarians are in every sense of the word, technologists. Yet, we have largely maintained what is referred to as the high touch, the ability to balance technology with humanism and an overarching focus on student-centered service.

But one area in which academic librarians lag is in our understanding of pedagogy and adoption of instructional design theory and practice. These skill sets have long been ignored within library education, despite academic librarians being integral to the teaching and learning process. Many members of our profession are woefully deficient in their knowledge of how learning takes place, how structures for effective learning are designed, and how learning outcomes are assessed.

The concept of the blended librarian is largely built on creating a movement that will encourage and enable academic librarians to evolve into a new role in which the skills and knowledge of instructional design are wedded to our existing library and information technology skills. It is the blended librarian who will excel as the academic professional

offering the best combination of skills and services to enable faculty to apply technology for enhanced teaching and student learning. We define the blended librarian as an academic librarian who combines the traditional skill set of librarianship with the information technologists hardware/software skills, and the instructional or educational designer's ability to apply technology appropriately in the teaching-learning process.

### **The principles of blended librarianship**

There are six principles of blended librarianship:

1. Taking leadership positions as campus innovators and change agents is critical to the success of delivering library services in today's information society.

2. Committing to developing campus-wide information literacy initiatives on our campuses in order to facilitate our ongoing involvement in the teaching and learning process is necessary.

3. Designing instructional and educational programs and classes to assist patrons in using library services and learning information literacy is absolutely essential to gaining the necessary skills (trade) and knowledge (profession) for lifelong success.

4. Collaborating and engaging in dialogue with instructional technologists and designers is vital to the development of programs, services and resources needed to facilitate the instructional mission of academic libraries.

5. Implementing adaptive, creative, proactive, and innovative change in library instruction can be enhanced by communicating and collaborating with newly created instructional technology/design librarians and existing instructional designers and technologists.

6. Transforming our relationship with faculty requires that we concentrate our efforts to assist them in integrating technology and library resources into (hybrid/blended) courses. We must also add to our traditional role a new capacity for collaboration to improve student learning and outcome assessment in the areas of information access, retrieval, and integration.

### **A blueprint for action**

Now is the time to engage our academic library colleagues in a dialogue about the principles of blended librarianship, and how

we might best go about operationalizing them. The goal recognizes the work completed by ACRL's Focus on the Future Task Force, and seeks to build on its foundations with a movement that can be accessible to all academic librarians.

In 2002 that task force identified seven overarching challenges confronting academic librarians in the new millennium. We believe that the blended librarian framework for integrating librarians into the teaching and learning process addresses the second challenge, Role of Library in Academic Enterprises. It stated, "some feel that libraries are becoming marginalized and librarians must demonstrate to the campus community that the library remains central to academic effort. The blended librarian specifically responds to the task force's call for ways to promote the values, expertise, and leadership of the profession throughout campus to ensure appreciation for the roles librarians can and do play."<sup>2</sup>

We mean to do more than just express an idea. Our goal is to raise awareness, promote the contributions librarians can make, and create change. An important part of this process is communicating the blended librarian concept, involving our colleagues in a discussion about it, and creating a forum that will allow new ideas and programs to develop. We considered a variety of mechanisms for building a platform for discovery and decided to adopt a relatively new approach that should allow for wide participation.

With cooperation from our colleagues at the LearningTimes Online Library Community, we have created a Blended Librarian Forum. This forum will provide a virtual learning community where librarians and other academic support professionals can meet to discuss how they are integrating themselves into the teaching and learning process on their campuses.

Using discussion groups, Webcasts and virtual chat sessions, shared learning objects, and more, the Blended Librarian Forum will provide an online learning opportunity where academic librarians and their colleagues can share knowledge and contribute to shaping the concept and developing the skills of blended librarianship.

Participants from the authors' April 2004 ACRL/TLT Group information literacy and collaboration online workshops received

invitations to join. As of June 2004, more than 50 individuals chose to join the Blended Librarians Forum. Librarians interested in participating should contact either of the authors for additional information.

## Conclusion

The blended librarian is an idea in its infancy. We have yet to fully understand its entire ramifications or the cascading consequences it may produce, either positive or negative. We believe we would be remiss if we failed to admit we are uncertain about its future growth as a concept that has meaning for all academic librarians. But we do believe that the time is ripe for action that lays the groundwork for deeper integration of our profession into the mainstream functions of

higher education. We encourage all of our colleagues to work with us in shaping a learning community that will further define who the blended librarian is, and what he or she will ultimately contribute to his or her institution of higher education.

## Notes

1. Outsell Inc. Outlook 2004: Issues In The Information Marketplace report dated December 19, 2003, [www.outsellinc.com/subscribe/freebriefsOutlook.htm](http://www.outsellinc.com/subscribe/freebriefsOutlook.htm).

2. W. Lee Hisle, Top issues facing academic libraries: A report of the Focus on the Future Task Force, 63 *C&RL News*, no. 10, (November 2002): 714-715, 730. Also available at [www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/crlnews/backissues2002/novmonth/topissuesfacing.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/crlnews/backissues2002/novmonth/topissuesfacing.htm). ■

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*(New leadership..." continued from page 365)*

A look at library management today shows that, unfortunately, most of us are not there yet. Our institutions are built on fairly rigid traditions and librarianship seems to attract the risk-averse. However, library leaders with the right stuff can and will shake off those old notions to create a culture of leadership which allows workers more control of their environment, creates a feedback mechanism from the front line, and helps ensure a more satisfied and productive staff. This in turn can lead to higher customer satisfaction.

## The right stuff?

Some of our current library leaders have the right stuff. Middle managers, many of whom will become the library leaders of tomorrow, are developing those skills now. Much of their learning happens as organizations change, but much is also dependent on the willingness of emerging leaders to adopt a new leadership ethos. The attributes listed above, the right stuff for library leaders, are necessary skills for success in the evolving library organization.

Better managed libraries make libraries nicer places to work and provide better service to user constituencies. The new library leader with the right stuff will propel libraries into an uncertain future with grace and aplomb.

## Notes

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2. Merrily Taylor, Getting It All Together: Leadership Requirements for the Future of Information Services *Journal of Library Administration* 20, no. 3/4: 9-24.

3. Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1979).

4. James Prochaska, et al., *Changing for Good* (William Morrow and Company, 1994).

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10. Elizabeth Hawk and Garrett Sheridan, The Right Staff *Management Review* 88, no. 6 (June 1999): 43-48.

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12. Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (Simon & Schuster, 1991). ■