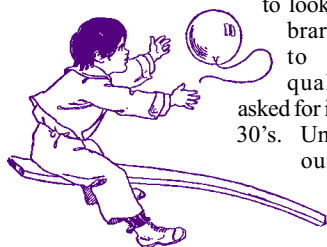


Back Talk — Continuity and Change

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Recently I was preparing for a talk about changing staffing needs. I began to think about how things had changed just during my own years working in libraries. As librarians we used to live in a card culture. Younger librarians today would have no knowledge of the catalog filing parties that would sometimes be held to bribe everyone in the library to help Cataloguing catch up with their filing backlog (actually it was quite an unhealthy thing to do since it demonstrated to reference/collection development librarians like me that filing/finding rules were totally impossible to master unless you did it all the time — my faith in subject headings has not ever recovered from the experience). Then there were Kardex files to be kept up with serials receipt, claiming, and binding status information that was entered in codes known only to serials department veterans. And of course we all wrote notes on P Slips that were the same size as catalogue cards. There are a number of other things that we no longer have to do: keep track of innumerable supplements to printed indexes and abstracts, master the use of alphabetical serials lists not filed using the same rules as the cards in the catalogue, and the use of locational catalogs to find materials stored in various branch libraries and storage collections.

Memories such as these caused me to want to look at early librarian job ads to see what qualities were asked for in the 20's or 30's. Unfortunately, our older Library Journal volumes are



in remote storage and since I have zero patience I decided to go online to see what I could find. Fortunately, we have **Early English Books Online**. I still didn't really expect to find much but was very pleased to find a small book/perhaps a tract entitled *The Reformed Librarian Keeper* by **John Durie**, published in 1650. **Mr. Durie/Dury** was not a librarian but a user of libraries and very unhappy with the one at **Oxford**. But the advice that he passed down to us is unsettlingly familiar: He said it was the job of the library-keeper to (I have numbered the component parts of what he had to say):

1. "keep the publick stock of Learning, which is in Books and Manuscripts
2. to increas it, and
3. to propose it to others in the waie which may bee most useful unto all;
4. his work then is to bee a Factor and Trader for helps to Learning, and a
5. Treasurer to keep them, and a
6. dispenser to applie them to use,
7. or to see them well used,
8. or at least not abused" (Page 80.)

So, 350 years ago we were entreated to maintain an archive of materials, to collect more, to teach people how to use them, to secure materials to aid in the learning process, to conserve them, to promote their use, and to prevent them from being damaged or abused. He went on to give instruction on cataloguing with both subject and author access and stressed the importance of selecting the best materials (although he thought poorer materials should still be acquired but housed separately).

In my own working life many activities that were once quite common have disappeared, but the basic values related to what we should do have remained quite constant. Another piece of evidence I thought you might find interesting relates to a comparison of how my own library spent its funds 50 years ago and today. In 1956-57 our total budget was only \$0.5 million Hong Kong dollars and for 2006-07 it is \$168 million (\$7.8 HK equal to \$1 US). But while the numbers of dollars have increased greatly, there is a fair amount of continuity in how we spend our resources:

Expense Category	1955-56	2006-07
Salaries	54.5%	42.7%
General Expenses	2.6%	5.9%
Library Materials and Binding	42.9%	51.4%

We do spend 10% less on salaries and about the same percent difference more on library materials, and we spend much more on general expenses including computer equipment, etc. Yet, given the differences in the information worlds of 50 years ago and today, it is amazing that things are still so similar. Have we changed so little other than buying electronic information instead of ink on paper? You might all see if you can make such historical comparisons just for the fun of it.

But will things continue to be the same or is this proof that we librarians are still holding on to a vision of the past that will soon disappear? It is times like this that we need to at least look at librarianship in the larger educational context: 1,600 years ago **Plato** stood in front of students to teach them and the same mode of instruction happens on our campuses daily.

In the 1960's when I was in graduate school we all had to think in terms of paradigm shifts, e.g., things really change when all the old answers or assumptions are no longer valid. What about the assumptions we and **John Durie** have held so dear about librarianship, are they still valid? Here are a few assumptions whose continued validity might be questioned:

1. Students learn by reading (Podcasts anyone?)
2. Students need to be taught how to find information (90% or so seem to embrace Google without lessons.)
3. Libraries will always need to collect printed books (This seems to be safe so far, but the need to collect printed journals fell in the span of a few years.)
4. Students want f2f help (We certainly do have fans but most people do without us.)

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5. We can offer little or no service from 10 PM to 8AM (High percent of school work is done long after we close our doors and we are embracing 24/7 in the information commons context.)
6. MARC cataloging is worth the cost (Only if it is the cost of copy cataloging)
7. Readers need to have smart people select materials for them (my own studies have shown that e-books selected by users always out circulate expert-selected e-books and **Google** seems to satisfy most people within the first two screens most of the time.)
8. Satisfying most users is recognized as good enough (Begrudgingly accepted, but this is why huge libraries are revered so much and why **Google** is appreciated so easily.)

9. Silence is golden in a library (Doesn't seem important to most undergraduates most of the time.)
10. Food and libraries don't mix (My librarians still feel this way but students clearly don't.)

I could go on and on, but you get the idea. And of course we are not the only ones on our campuses reflecting on all of this.

Now I realize that lots of librarians have been going down this doom and gloom trail for a long time. In my own case I still continue to take solace and encouragement from the failure of the long expected paperless office; the continued growth of publishing and bookstores; the ongoing complaints and demands for longer library hours; the number one complaint at my campus that we lack books in the reader's field even though we buy tens and tens of thousands of them annually; the emails from students expressing thanks for the help they received last Tuesday night at 8:00 from the lady with white hair; the high number of students filling our 24/7 Student Study Centre; the pleasure of keyword searching across human generated LC

subject headings and cataloging notes; continued demand for browsing in collections selected by experts; continued high ratings from students who don't mind unmercifully flaying all the other bureaucratic agencies on campus; the complaints from students when it gets too noisy or when people talk on their mobiles (cell phones); and — well I have to admit I don't hear a hue and cry from users to get rid of the food.

So, in our life of constant change there continues to be continuities as well. Let me end with a quote taken from a T-shirt I bought this summer at the **Vancouver Public Library**: "I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library." **Jorge Luis Borges**. Let's hope he is right. 