

Little Red Herrings — How Do You Like Your Librarianship: Straight-up or Blended?

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

For, oh, the last 100-plus years, academic librarianship has changed very little. Yes, I know, there is such a thing as **Google**, and we do have that thing called the Web. I'm not dismissing — or dissing — those facets of our work. But for the better part of the last 100+/- years, academic librarianship hasn't changed all that much: we've just added new chores to the same old routines. For most of our history, we have been as siloistic as the professoriate in which we serve and work: reference, cataloging, monographs, serials. Even though it has begun to change, if **Dewey** — **Melville**, of course, not **John** — were to read many of today's job titles, I doubt he'd be very surprised, or even puzzled. As far as the structure goes, it's pretty much librarianship served straight-up or neat, as it were.

Maybe we need not be too hard on our profession for eighty-five of those 100 years since there may not have been anything to change. But certainly over the last decade and a half, we should have been rethinking how we serve up what we do. We face numerous challenges today, most of them threatening to assume our place at the information delivery table.

Academic librarianship has always been that round peg in the square hole in academe. We're not really faculty in the most common sense of that word, though every time I say that I get tons of hate mail — mostly from my own faculty. Of course, we're not really administration, either. We're a blend of both with some other *tertium quid* thrown in. While we are educators to be sure (in any sense of that word), we're not faculty in the sense of the work that defines that word. We've tried desperately to be faculty, even trying, with very limited success, I think, and often to our own detriment, to define ourselves in the same fashion as faculty in its — not our — holy trinity: teaching, service and scholarship. It is as if we think being a librarian isn't good or honorable enough, so we have to fake something else.

But why pretend or fake anything? Why not just refashion what we do to meet the challenges of the times while redefining our service in terms of what we do? The ubiquitous **Steven Bell** and **John Shank** have been doing just that, and they have come upon a redesigned librarianship they believe positions us uniquely in academe, while delivering better services and more

than the “neat” or straight-up version. Whether we like it or not, our profession is being marginalized, they argue, and we had better get busy with rethinking, refashioning or redoing it.

The usual suspects have created our marginalization: automation, the Web, digitization, **Google**, eBooks, software and courseware, **Amazon.com** and more. The end result, they contend, is that the library “no longer is the de facto resource of first [and possibly not the second or third] choice for those it exists to serve.”

Enter the **Blended Librarian**. The concept, they contend, is configured to enable librarians to take advantage of instructional design theory and practice and apply it to the teaching of library usage and the development of information literacy skills. But it is also more than that as the authors add the **Blended Librarian's Manifesto** in six basic principles:

Taking leadership positions as innovators and change agents in delivering library services;

Developing campus-wide information literacy initiatives;

Designing instructional and educational programs and classes to assist academic community members and patrons in gaining requisite information literacy skills for lifelong learning;

Communicating with instructional technologists and designers to facilitate the mission of the academic library;

Redesigning and overhauling library instruction using new instructional design technologies and theories; and,

Transforming our relationship with faculty to integrate technology and library resources into “blended/hybrid” courses, while collaborating more extensively to improve student learning, achievement and outcome assessment in information access, retrieval and integration.

Bell and **Shank** continue their discussion at www.blendedlibrarian.org and provide guidance on how to join the **Blended Librarian Online Learning Community**. Thousands of librarians are already members along with many other educators outside the library. Librarians, skeptical or not, should at least take a look if they haven't already.

What does all this mean? **Bell** and **Shank** have distilled more in their 2007 **ALA** publication, *Academic Librarianship by Design*, but even there it isn't fully fleshed out. Indeed, both **Bell** and **Shank** contend that, “The **Blended Librarian** is an idea in its infancy. We have yet to fully understand its entire ramification or the cascading consequences it may produce, either positive or negative. We believe we would be amiss 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.”

In the short run, I think it means that librarians must become more proactive about everything they do and seek ways to be sure their constituents know what it is they do, why they are doing it, and why it's important. I think it means insinuating ourselves at the heart of information delivery via technology and its associated instructional technologies. I think it means taking on new, different and even some less familiar roles on campuses than we've taken in the past. I think it means we strive to be involved in every aspect of information delivery wherever it occurs on our campuses: in the library, in the classroom, in the dorms, anywhere.

In case you've missed it, we're rapidly being outsourced by many new and, I believe, inferior delivery systems. The reliable and thoughtful are being replaced by the rapid and voluminous, regardless of whether the rapid or voluminous answers any inquiry. It does not take a bean-counting evil genius to look at the free use of **Google** against the expensive use of aggregate databases to draw a conclusion that spells the end of library services as we understand them. We must attempt something new, something better and something more obviously value-added if we intend to survive. Blended librarianship may be the first step on that long, difficult and surely bumpy road.

Naysayers will contend that everything I've written here is exactly what we've always done. Nothing to see here, they'll say, let's move on. But it's just that view that has left us as the fading flowers in the garden of academe. We're wilting fast as a profession, and it's high time we took a proactive approach, not just for our collective futures, but for the future of students we have so long and so loyally served. 🌱

