Director's Message: User-Centric, Change-Literate Future-Thinking: Getting Down to Basics

By Kate Carpenter

During a recent department heads retreat, convened at our Rockford regional campus of the UIC Library of the Health Sciences, we ended our first day with a journal club discussion of “Librarian as Futurist: Changing the Way Libraries Think about the Future” by Brian Mathews (portal: Libraries and the Academy, 14(3): 453-462, July 2014).

Perhaps it was the visual stimulation of our windowed conference room overlooking a large field where wild turkeys forage (just not that day) that propelled the considerable value we hold for user-centered practice to a new level of enthusiasm. Maybe the satisfaction of gathering together to consider accomplishments and obstacles, compile our Big Projects list and determine ways to carry out what we consider our key initiatives sparked our desire to better understand what the future might bring. The forces unleashed in that conference room also ignited our intention to formulate a change agenda driven both by what the users experience in their worlds and what their experience may become in the future.

If we don’t concern ourselves with the conditions, trends, decisions, and external factors with which clinicians, students, and scholars grapple, do we lose our identity as libraries? Do we just become what our users need at any particular point, responding to urgencies and emergencies, struggling to keep up with their realities and often having external changes forced on us? Or do we continue to address what the core of the library is and can be?

Mathews’ essay offered us a perspective, an approach, and a number of tactics for gaining stronger skills and greater knowledge in change literacy and future thinking. Thinking ahead, whether that is through strategic foresight, or scenario planning or strategic planning, is essential for organizational vitality as well as management. Change literacy, fluency in future thinking, and acceptance of ambiguity are key parts of a flexible, perceptive, and prepared approach to future conditions. Tactics such as keeping current with demographic information, using data and paying attention to unexpected results, considering a wide range of scenarios, from worst-case to best-case and local to global, all enable a wide range of possible responses on the library’s part.
The cognitive leap for us was the realization that we need, and are nearly ready for, a change agenda for our information practice in the health sciences. First, though, we need to explore our perspectives, determine our approach, and develop our change literacy and future thinking skills and integrate them with our robust user-centered approach to our work.

As if a change agenda wasn't an exciting enough outcome, our discussion was abruptly ended by an unprecedented, campus-wide power outage (of course, we kept talking for a while before we accepted that conditions had changed). Is this a sign that our journey has already begun?

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