Embracing Chaos

By Michael Stephens

IN COGNITIVE SURPLUS, CLAY Shirky explores three ways that society might approach incorporating and adopting emerging technologies. The scenarios include “traditionalist approval,” “negotiated transition,” and “as much chaos as we can stand.” All could easily apply to how libraries, information centers, and educational institutions might respond to emerging technologies as well. Where does your organization fall?

Traditional roadblocks

Traditionalists want plans and services to move through the appropriate channels. Shirky uses the example of email being placed under the control of the U.S. Postal Service. That’s like aligning a library’s web presence with marketing and promotion. It may make sense, but participation from staff across the organization creates an even richer, human message in multiple voices. I learned long ago that library PR speak is just that—unless authenticity and transparency are guiding forces.

Sometimes, tradition collides with newer approaches that might make some uncomfortable. Several years ago, librarians shuttling me from the airport for a talk confided that most of their proposals had stopped on an administrator’s desk. For weeks, nothing happened. That person had become a roadblock in every sense of the word. In my talk that day, I called for nimble administration’s desk. For weeks, nothing happened. That person had become a roadblock in every sense of the word. In my talk that day, I called for nimble action and for all to push their boundaries.

Meeting in the middle

In a “negotiated transaction,” all stakeholders gather to iron out the best way to go forward. Radical ideas and “old school” methods meet at the same table to hash things out. I have an affinity for this approach. The traditionalists bring foundational thinking—what libraries have always done and what mission we serve—while the futurists cite evidence such as recent studies from the Pew Internet & American Life Project or the Horizon Report to illustrate the need to incorporate a mobile site, tablet support, or gamification.

These groups, one hopes, meet in-the-middle to make something wonderful, but the opposite may occur, with greater friction when some participants fail to see the other’s side. Negotiation and communication are key to “negotiated transition,” as well as learning. The unknown can be scary, especially to traditionalists. Talking and exploring together is an antidote.

Here comes everyone

Shirky, of course, advocates that we embrace “as much chaos as we can stand.” In this scenario, staff is encouraged to try out a new thing without regard to the way “it’s always been done.” This is messy, scary, and probably unwanted in most institutions. If the library can articulate the boundaries and define just how far out on the bleeding edge it will go with experimentation, that can set the stage for Shirky’s ideal approach to emerging technologies.

Responding to chaos

Part of me is tempted to argue that this is not a debate between those who want control and those who want chaos. The forward-thinking librarian understands that Shirky’s “everybody’s coming” is the future. We are now living in the chaotic world, and we do not have a choice regarding where we can position ourselves. Our choice lies in how we respond. If we continue to respond to chaos using tools from the old world of control, then we will always fail. LIS students need to understand that the world is chaos, and it is our job to build our organizations in ways that can thrive within this chaos.

Calling for chaos implies a universe where it is impossible for an organization to respond and operate. This is not so. Control freaks like the word chaos because it gives them an out when it comes to operating in the current environment. By saying it’s chaos they validate their slow, tedious, old-world management styles, even though such styles no longer work. Those unsigned proposals are a symptom of this mind-set.

We live in a world that multitasks—events and crises come concurrently, not singly or in a linear fashion. LIS management classes must teach future leaders to live and operate in that multitasking world. They must be able to juggle multiple crises and parallel events simultaneously. They must be flexible and nimble. They must be able to prioritize within that chaotic environment. Micromanagement does not work in a chaotic world. You’ll never get anything done!

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In my early presentations with Jenny Levine about blogging and social participation within library services, folks expressed worry and even outrage that patrons might leave comments on library posts that were negative. This concern probably stopped a lot of library blogs outright or led to simple, one-way, comment-disabled broadcasting. Now, the ability to comment and participate seems to be built into everything—including checking in to your favorite TV show, reviewing hotels on TripAdvisor, sharing suggestions on Goodreads, and more. Control gives way to conversation. I recently heard a speaker call for “chaos in the catalog” as a means to involve everyone in creating the library’s collection and access points. The audience bristled, but some applauded.

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