Features

A few months ago in "Holding Us Back" ( LJ 4/15/13, p. 42), I suggested that one of the things preventing librarians from working at web scale might be "a lingering emphasis on collections over users." I and others have argued that the evolution of libraries and library service will include a pronounced shift from libraries as book warehouses to libraries as centers for discovery, learning, and creation via any number of platforms.

I might have been guilty of a bit of collection bashing in these discussions, and recent occurrences of collection trashing have given me pause. I still see the path forward detailed above as viable and inevitable, but we must also not forget that stewardship must not be sacrificed for a 3-D printer or a wall of monitors highlighting a digital collection.

Learning from #bookgate

I followed with great interest the weeding kerfuffle now known as #bookgate at the Urbana Free Library (UFL) in Illinois. Tweets, news stories, and Facebook shares painted a grim picture of a weeding project gone horribly wrong. In a nutshell: books more than ten years old were removed from the nonfiction collection without reference to any other criteria.

I wished Michael Casey (now information technology director, Gwinnett County Public Library, GA) and I were still writing LJ’s Transparent Library column, because as the story unfolded, most of what I read about the weeding process and administration of UFL was decidedly opaque. A possibly misguided strategic planning process was criticized as lacking community involvement.

Outrage ensued across the online spaces librarians inhabit, as well as those of UFL patrons and watchdog types. I would call this an example of closed governance -- something we see going away, quickly, in the face of the open government movement. It will also be a case study to end all case studies in collection development and management classes across LIS.

Carol Tilley, assistant professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, was instrumental in sharing links, commentary, and retweets during #bookgate and, with others in the community, put together a website devoted to reclaiming and supporting UFL. It will remain a valuable resource even after the immediate crisis is resolved, because all of us in the field should learn from these events.

Even as books go digital and directly to readers' devices, there are still print materials and media to purchase and share -- and deselect when the time comes and criteria are met. Engaging with the public during each step of this process keeps them involved and reduces after-the-fact wrath.

One of Tilley’s Twitter shares was a link to a news piece about Onondaga Public Library in Syracuse, NY, headlined, "Save 1,100 vintage science fiction books from destruction!" The library is seeking creative proposals for passing on a little-used sf collection. Great books, not circulating, must go to good homes, the library is essentially saying. That's transparency at its best -- transparent and shared leadership. Organizations like libraries can either battle their public or work with it. The long-term solution is openness.

Beyond the collection

The tale of #bookgate should be a catalyst for librarians to offer more participatory avenues, to engage with not only the care and nurturing of our collections but with all aspects of our services. A library operating without the input of its constituents is missing a vital component.

I bounced these thoughts off Casey, who replied, "We can even look to radically transparent movements in the area of government budget building with some of the new participatory budgeting processes coming out of Chicago and New York City. Urbana and some other libraries would do well to look to some newer forms of radical transparency."
Programming is another area where public involvement would enhance offerings. Does your library engage with a group of constituents to map out possible ideas for programs and events? Are you still offering the same programs you developed years ago because they are easy to replicate? Paying attention to user interests will help gauge what's hot right now. Fresh voices and ideas from beyond library staff input might lead to some intriguing and popular initiatives.

These ideas should permeate our work in LIS classrooms. LIS courses that incorporate participatory design into student work give new graduates the skills and mind-set to use it in practice. This summer, my coinstructor, Kyle Jones, and I are designing a new assignment for the Hyperlinked Library MOOC (massive open online course) and course that my school is offering this fall. This community engagement exercise will get our students thinking about building services and planning for the future with participation and feedback from all stakeholders. I hope libraries considering sweeping changes will do the same.

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