

Who Let The Librarians Out? The Promise of Embedded Librarianship

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1. Introduction

Good morning.

I'm here to talk about the professional topic that is nearest and dearest to my heart: embedded librarianship. In an article in *Information Outlook*, called "The Future of Reference in Special Libraries Is What Information Professionals Make It", Stephen Abram, the past president of the Special Libraries Association, cited embedded librarianship as one of the promising trends for the future. I believe that indeed it does hold tremendous promise for our profession, and I'm committed to making the promise real.

For the next 45 minutes or so, I'd like to take you with me on an exploration of this new model of library services that's being called "embedded librarianship". My colleague Mary Talley and I are studying this topic right now thanks to a grant from the Special Libraries Association, and I'll be drawing on that work a little bit in my talk. I'd like to start by thanking SLA for their support.

2. Stories

Let's start our exploration by illustrating "embedded librarianship" with a couple of stories.

Is anybody here from Purdue?

If so, you already know my first story. Purdue University, home of the Boilermakers, is also home to a very successful Animal Sciences Department. And, since it is in the great hog producing state of Indiana, a lot of their work is related to hog production. Now, Purdue has a butcher shop, the Boiler Butcher Block, that sells the output of the Animal Sciences Dept. But they had a problem. Production was running ahead of sales, and unless something was done, they were looking at having 20,000 pounds of unsold pork on their hands.

So the wise faculty at Purdue did what any wise academics would do – they assigned the problem to their students. Specifically, AgEcon 427, the Advanced Agribusiness Marketing class.

When the librarians at the Purdue Libraries heard about this class assignment, they did what smart, proactive librarians would do: they approached the instructor with a proposal to incorporate information literacy instruction into the course. After all, it was a natural fit: the students would need to do sophisticated searching of the marketing information resources to develop good marketing plans for the unsold pork.

Wisely, the instructor agreed, and so it was that three Purdue librarians became information advisers to student project teams assigned to come up with different ways to unload the unsold pork.

Note how this played out. The three librarians were introduced to the class at its second meeting. Then they started meeting with the groups. There were some bumps in the road – they report that they weren't as proactive as they could have been, so they missed some opportunities to inculcate information literacy skills. Still and all, the instructor reported that their involvement did make a difference. Student marketing plans were much improved over past terms when librarians weren't involved.

You can read their report in the November 2008 issue of the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Information*.

So there's one example of embedded librarianship – librarians who participated actively in an academic course, taking responsibility for teaching information literacy skills and making a difference in the learning outcomes for the students. Their main lesson learned was this: in the future they would be more embedded, and take more responsibility and more initiative to assert their role.

That's story number one. For story number two, let's switch from hogs to sheep.

This story comes from New Zealand. AgResearch is an agricultural research institute, owned by the government of New Zealand, that employs over 1,000 staff, including over 650 scientists, at four locations. They have a history of success, not just in sheep, but in diversified animal and plant research, with current initiatives in bioinformatics, proteomics, nutraceuticals, and other areas.

In volume 26, no. 2 of the *Reference Services Review*, the AgResearch Knowledge Services Manager, Sue Weddell, describes the evolution of the institute's libraries.

The librarians at AgResearch have been making changes to improve their service to the enterprise. First they consolidated library operations under central direction to improve coordination among the four sites. Then, in the last few years, they noticed that the scientists weren't coming to the libraries as much – didn't need to come to the libraries as much – and weren't asking as many reference questions as they used to. Their response was– as Sue says in her article – to “create a more pro-active specialist information service ... tailored to individual/team/group needs and to embed reference staff where feasible, with project teams as their key information advisors.” Starting in January 2005, the AgResearch librarians followed a systematic process of implementing their new

model. and Sue reports that skeptics have been won over and that the new services are highly valued. Perhaps most significant of all, the staff has expanded from 5 and a half full time equivalents in 2005 to eight in 2007. They've never done a big, splashy rollout of the new service – they've implemented it quietly, group by group, with lots of library staff coordination and personal contact. Their growth is an indicator of their success, but they're not content with that. Their next steps are to do a formal evaluation of the services, and to begin physically moving librarians into the office areas with the groups they serve.

In preparing for this talk, I sent Sue a note and asked how things were going since she finished the article. Here's an excerpt of what she wrote, quoted by permission:

“We have moved our Knowledge Advisors at one site in with science teams, we had the ideal opportunity at the beginning of 2008. ... Initially we thought we would trial for about 3 months and see how it went. Within 2 months the KAs were begging to stay with science teams & not go back to the Library, the science teams themselves were really enjoying having KA input into their science research and consequently 15 month on the 'embedding' has remained at that site. I have noticed an increase in work ... I have also noticed that the work is at a much higher level than before, there is more in depth research required and as the trust has built up so has the requirement for more analysis of results.”

In short, AgResearch is moving from success to more success with their embedded library services program.

3. Common Threads

So there you have two libraries, in two very different types of organizations, about as far from one another as you can get on the planet. They have two things in common – both are in agriculture, and both are developing what I would call embedded library services. Taken together, they give us insights into two critical questions about Embedded Librarianship: what is it, and why would you want to do it?

They illustrate that embedding can take a variety of forms, and deliver a variety of services and benefits.

Sometimes, the librarian moves out of the library, on a full time or part time basis, in order to interact more closely and naturally with members of a customer group in their own space.

But there are other examples where the embedding is purely virtual – where the librarian is engaged in a distance learning program, or serves professionals that she rarely if ever sees. In our research, we've studied an organization where the librarian on the East Coast works with a distributed professional group whose leader is based on the West Coast, and members scattered on both coasts and in between.

Sometimes, the librarian is administratively transferred to the customer group, and has no fiscal or administrative ties to the central library organization. But then, there are central library organizations that take on the role of funding and managing embedded librarians that are scattered throughout the organization – as in both of the stories.

It doesn't matter what the service itself is. It might be co-teaching and counseling students. It might be doing in-depth research, or content management, or knowledge management, for a project team. It's whatever that organization needs most from a librarian.

So, you may wonder, if embedded librarianship is so diverse, what are the common threads? What makes one librarian "embedded" and another not? If it's not where your office is, or who pays your salary, or who writes your performance review, or even what kind of library work you do – what is it?

That's a good question. I'd answer it in two ways. First, it isn't that you are either embedded or you're not. There are elements of embeddedness, and some librarians have more, stronger elements of it than others. Second, I think there are two essential features. The first is shared responsibility for achieving common goals, and the second is a strong, ongoing relationship built on personal and professional trust.

Think of it. The librarians at Purdue weren't saying to the instructor, "we have a bibliographic instruction seminar, you should require your students to sign up for it and good luck." They stepped forward and said to the Ag Econ instructor (in effect – these are my words, not theirs), "We can make your students better researchers. We can improve the learning outcomes in your class. We are willing to take responsibility for this if you'll collaborate with us. (Not to mention that we'll help you get those 20,000 pounds of pork sold.)"

The librarians at AgResearch went from (in effect) "we run libraries, and if the researchers only understood them, and us, they would use us more" to "we need to reach out to the researchers, get out of the libraries, build relationships, work in the project teams, contribute directly to the research program – make ourselves more useful to the organization."

So, the ways that embedded librarianship is done may vary, but the common themes are responsibility and relationships. The librarians have shared responsibility for organizational outcomes, and they develop peer to peer relationships of professional trust with those who need their expertise.

4. Benefits

Now, why would you want to do this, if you're not already? I'll answer that with two more words: value, and excitement.

Value. When you are an embedded librarian, you have the opportunity to make the value of your professional skills and knowledge directly relevant to your organization. That's because you are directly applying your skills to achieving organizational goals and objectives.

If you are in an educational environment – a university – your curriculum has learning objectives for the students. You're doing reference desk duty in a traditional library reference desk setting. Do your services contribute to those learning objectives? You have no way to know. And frankly, what I hear and read isn't too positive. But if you're delivering embedded instruction in a course, and customized counseling to student project teams, then your results can be measured directly in terms of the quality of student work and in terms of the learning objectives for that course. And maybe even in improved student performance in subsequent courses – as one faculty member reported in one of our SLA research interviews. And all the reports I've seen, that compare embedded instruction to the alternative, find much better outcomes with the embedded approach.

If you're working with researchers, it's basically the same value proposition – instead of learning outcomes, you're contributing to achieving the research goals.

Why is this so? I'll give you my theory – based on anecdotes and what we know about users and information seeking behavior. We know, from the past couple decades of research in information seeking behavior, that people have a hard time articulating their information needs. We also know that they don't automatically run to the library the minute they need to find something out. What this means is, there are a lot of unasked questions out there – questions that librarians could answer – but we never get the chance, because we are sitting at the reference desk and the researchers never come to us to ask them. Now suppose that you the reference librarian are sitting in the research meeting, or just having a conversation with two or three members of your research team. They don't have to ask the question – you recognize it, and ask it, and then go answer it. You listen, and you spot the unasked question.

(This very approach, by the way, has been proposed for clinical medical librarians working with nurses – that they go chat with the nurses when the shifts are changing, and spot the unasked questions about patient care that the nurses bring up in their conversations.)

So, there's a strong case that embedded library services are both more visible, and actually more valuable, in achieving the parent organization's goals than traditional library public services.

But wait, there's more. The second reason to adopt an embedded service model is excitement. Most librarians like what they do. But successful embedded librarians really love what they do. This excitement comes out in the literature, and we've seen it in our research as well. It's gratifying to help someone, as librarians do all the time -- but to see exactly how your contributions help develop a naïve student into a sophisticated

researcher, or contribute to a scientific breakthrough – that’s really exciting. Because embedded librarians share the responsibility for outcomes, they get to trace their work directly to positive results in a way that most other librarians do much more rarely. Embedded librarianship is exciting, and fun, and I haven’t met a single successful embedded librarian who wants to go back to the old way of doing library services.

5. Initiating Embedded Services

If you’re not doing embedded services now, you may be wondering, how can I get started? If you are already out there sharing responsibility and building trusted relationships, you may be concerned with sustaining your services over time. Let’s briefly look at some ideas for building and sustaining an embedded model of library services.

I like the “ready, set, go” model of program initiation. Step one is, determine whether your organization is ready for the embedded services model. Are the library staff ready? Are your customers, and the parent organization you work in, ready?

First, the librarians. What skills and attributes do they need, in order to be successful as embedded librarians? This role really is not for everyone. Some of the characteristics we’re finding to be important are:

Excellent library skills. This is the sine qua non. You have to have this. If you have someone who’s not a good teacher, don’t embed them to co-teach a course. Either help them improve their skills or find something else for them to do. If you have someone who’s not all that resourceful as a database searcher, don’t assign them as the embedded information specialist for a research team. Same thing: either help them get better or give them something else to do.

Domain and context knowledge: Do you have staff that know the subject matter – in your case, the language and concepts of agricultural research – and can they converse in this language? The knowledge can be acquired through advanced degrees, or through years of experience – but having it is important. The librarian has to understand the domain she is dealing with.

Context knowledge is different. Do you have library staff who have worked in your organization for awhile, and understand how things get done? If you’re in a university, and staff have worked in other universities, some of that basic knowledge of academe may be transferable – but understanding organizational culture and how things work around your place is pretty important. One interesting thread that we’ve seen anecdotally is that volunteering for organizational service is a great way to gain context knowledge. If you’ve got someone who volunteered for the Bond Drive, or the United Way Campaign, or the staff picnic planning team – they might be the ones with the context knowledge that will help them succeed in an embedded role.

Finally, and also essential: excellent interpersonal and relationship building skills. I'm not talking about reference interviewing here. I'm talking about the ability to connect – with students, with faculty, with scientists – because it's through relationships that respect can be gained, trust won, and partnerships established.

Some staff may have these characteristics, and others may not. The fact is, some librarians can be successful in an embedded role, and others may struggle. There are reports in the literature and anecdotes from our research that when a whole staff is converted to the embedded model without careful selection and planning, some staff probably will not be successful. They may leave the organization, they may revert to old ways of working, or they may think they are embedded but never develop the relationships and deliver the value that they should. This is an issue that a library manager has to reckon with.

Similarly, not every customer group in your organization may be ready to take on an embedded librarian. Needs vary, attitudes vary. You probably can name several key individuals in your own organization that use library services constantly, and others that you never hear from. So, when you're starting embedded services, consider going first to those who know you and use your services – especially if they are also well respected and influential. Success with them can turn into a model for others in the organization.

So, once you have gotten Ready by assessing your library staff and the customers in your parent organization, then get Set by establishing agreement with key management players in the organization, and pilot your new embedded services.

How you establish these agreements depends on the culture of your organization. I actually thought that in our research we would find formal agreements or at least an exchange of emails between the library manager and the manager of the customer group getting the embedded services, or maybe the faculty member, or course manager, or somebody like that. I have to tell you that I don't think our data are telling us that. A lot of embedded relationships are done on conversations and maybe a handshake. Still, I think that time spent making sure everyone is on the same page about the services and how they will be delivered, might be time well spent.

A moment ago I spoke about assessing your customer groups as a part of Readiness. One thing that's interesting is that in the literature and in our research, we find lots of examples of customers – teaching faculty; scientists and researchers – requesting embedded services. Often – maybe most of the time -- librarians don't make the first move. Some of you may have experienced a customer coming to you and asking for this. One of our research interviewees follows the rule, “never say no”. This manager says yes, and then finds a way to deliver.

And that leads to one more aspect of getting Set for your embedded services initiative. What will your library stop doing? If reference staff take on responsibility for moving out into the customer community, they're not going to have time for something else. Maybe

they'll no longer be available for reference desk duty. So, how will library operations adjust?

In my own experience, as a library manager I made a decision to separate library reference services from embedded services, and personally I think that freeing up the librarians to concentrate only on their embedded work was a key factor in the success of our initiative. In our research, we have heard about libraries that are planning or implementing “single service points” – combined circulation and reference desks staffed by paraprofessionals – to enable experienced reference staff to take on embedded relationships.

Now you are ready to Go! This means starting the process of integrating the librarian into the customer group. In the case of a librarian co-teaching a course, it may be as simple as being introduced by the subject faculty member and then beginning to participate. In the case of joining an academic department or a research team, it may mean being introduced by the group's leader, being invited to the group meetings, making the rounds to meet all the members – things like that. One common thread that I think we're seeing is that the librarian does have to work at this. Oftentimes, frankly, I think the leader of the customer group should be an active sponsor and help this process along, but as an embedded librarian you may have to be prepared to take charge of advertising your own services, at least in the beginning until word spreads within the group.

6. Sustaining

Just like a garden, our professional relationships have to be tended and worked on if they're going to thrive. So it is with embedded librarianship.

It seems funny even to have to say this, but in fact there are plenty of examples of programs that falter for lack of followup. It seems to happen all the time.

The first part of sustaining an embedded services initiative is sustaining the librarians. You know, these initiatives are like the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Goldilocks found one bowl of porridge that was too hot, one that was too cold, and one that was just right, and so on with the chairs and the beds, if I remember.

Well, embedded librarians can be not successful enough, or too successful – they're not always “just right”. Staff who aren't successful enough require coaching, and mentoring. They need a hands-on manager who will recognize that they are struggling, and help them figure out why, and what to do about it.

Ok – but too successful? How can an embedded librarian be too successful? Well, I once had a staff member tell me that when she walked down the hallway in her customers' office area, she kept her head down and avoided making eye contact – because she was afraid people would ask her for help. She was too successful. She wasn't a slacker – she was working plenty more than 40 hours a week. She was in danger of burning out. And I

was in danger of losing a valuable staff member and seeing a promising initiative take a nosedive.

As a manager, there isn't one all-purpose prescription for this kind of problem. Your action depends on the circumstances.

You may have to help the individual learn to manage workload and know when to say no. You may have to get help on a temporary basis to deal with a crunch that will pass – to help balance the workload. You may have to get more resources to help out. So it all depends.

There's one more aspect of sustaining the librarians that I want to touch on, and that's maintaining cohesion and communication among the library staff. Librarians are really nice people, for the most part, and working in a library surrounded by other librarians is really nice, comfortable, and supportive. When you go forth as an embedded librarian, you can lose a lot of that contact. For some people, fear of losing that support and camaraderie is a reason to avoid an embedded role. For others, it's a necessary tradeoff. For the library manager, it threatens knowledge sharing and workload sharing among the library staff – both embedded and non-embedded – and can interfere with the smooth operations of library services. So, the wise manager finds ways to keep the group interacting, and helps both embedded and non-embedded staff sustain their relationships that foster knowledge sharing and smooth coordination.

The second aspect of sustaining the embedded relationship is sustaining the relationship with the customer group. I have to say that in our survey research, we don't see a lot of attention to this, and it's a matter of concern to me. What I advocate, speaking as a former manager now and not necessarily supported by our research, is that library managers consciously maintain an ongoing relationship with customer management. Part of that relationship needs to involve assessing the value of the embedded library services, and making sure the customer management knows the value.

I'm pleased to say that there are several examples in the literature and in our research where the impact of embedded information literacy instruction on learning outcomes has been documented. This is great news – putting the librarian into the course really improves student work! As managers, we need to replicate these measurements in our own institutions, and trumpet the good news to our administration. As professionals, we need to share more of these stories with our peers.

If we don't do this, we might not notice the danger for a long time – but I believe the failure to evaluate and to communicate will catch up with us. I know of one instance where a respected and well liked embedded librarian left an organization to take another job. Everybody thought she was great, but the customers didn't really understand what she did. There wasn't any formal evaluation. And so, after the position was vacant for awhile, and they realized that they hadn't collapsed without her – they decided to cut it to part time – and maybe they will decide to end it completely. The fact is, they don't know

what they are losing, in terms of student achievement or research productivity – because they don't have any formal assessment in place.

And so, successful programs can falter very quickly, if they are not evaluated and sustained.

7. Conclusion

Not long ago, I was attending another meeting of librarians, and the keynote speaker put forward this question:

“If content is king, how come we're not the information royalty?”

And someone in the audience answered, “because they don't understand what we do!”

Well, maybe. But I'm not so sure I agree with that. I think we librarians, as a profession, don't understand what we do – in terms of how we benefit our customers and our parent organizations. And how we can be even more valuable to them.

The fact is, the world needs more librarians. They may not know it, but it's true. Now information is all around us like never before in human history. Getting it isn't the problem – knowing what to do with it is.

And so, doesn't it make sense that service models we developed in the age of information scarcity will be superseded? And that new services that emphasize getting the right information, and using it well, will be the growth opportunities for us? And the ways that we will deliver greater value, and become more important to our universities, research institutes, and corporations than ever before?

The embedded library services model is one of the ways that we'll increase our value and gain recognition for our expertise. As embedded librarians we can solve our customers' information problems in ways we never can if we stay chained to the library and the reference desk. We'll be solving problems they never knew they had, and making direct and measurable contributions to their success.

Delivering embedded library services isn't easy, but it can be very rewarding. It can only happen when we get out of the library, into the classroom, into the research lab. I hope you'll join those who are expanding this new role for librarians.

And, when the question gets asked, “who let the librarians out?” you'll say “I did”. And you'll fulfill the promise of embedded librarianship.

Thank you.