
Innovation in the Library: 'everyone to the battlements!' or 'open the gates!'

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It seemed a fairly safe situation. The Library area was a reasonable size and with a collection of around 40,000 items and adding around 1000 per year, there appeared to be enough expansion space in the present shelving. If you ignored the faded carpet and the slightly musty odour, the Library area was, well, serviceable. There wasn't a surplus of money to allow refurbishing and so in 2001 when I started as Librarian at Morling College I thought that, unlike my experience in three other previous libraries, any possibility of having to move this Library was fairly remote.

It's now March 2003 and I have just completed overseeing the removal and relocation of every item in the library in our re-carpeting and air-conditioning project, made possible by a bequest of \$160,000 from the estate of the son of Gilbert Wright, the namesake of our Library.

It was a process of *removal* because the entire area was being re-carpeted, and of *relocation* because it was a great opportunity to rethink the way the Library service was running and to examine which areas needed reworking. Over the last three months, every item in the library has been relocated.

I have reversed the collection, in that it now runs from left to right, with the beginning of the collection adjacent to the new front entrance, as opposed to running right to left as before. A significant area of the collection that was shelved separately has been re-incorporated to the main collection, whilst still maintaining its uniqueness; quieter study areas have been created and the purchase of lower

reference shelves has brought more openness to the look and feel of the Library.

Looking toward the future, a circulation desk area has been created (at present, Morling uses a self-circulation system) and the closed reserve area is now under closer supervision with possibilities for development.

The opportunities to make significant physical changes to the library meant that the library's services and structure had to be carefully examined. Putting things back the way they were was an option, but that would have been ignoring the creative opportunity that was given.

Changes often bring opportunities for innovation in libraries, sometimes on this sort of scale, but most often in smaller areas and in routine processes. I believe that innovation is about our attitude to change and our openness to see possibilities and act upon them.

Some people think of innovation as the introduction of something that is so new or different that it is a world first or perhaps the first in the country or the first to be introduced into an organization of a particular type. Put the stakes as high as that and almost no one can play.¹

Peter Clayton follows on with a definition of innovation that makes the process accessible to all of us - innovation is essentially doing something for the first time in your organization and is "part of the field of management of change."²

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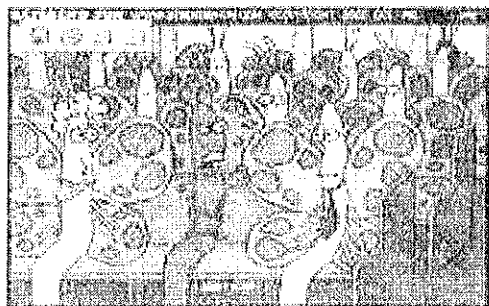
Change is an integral part of human existence. Heraclitus in the 5th century BCE claimed that there is nothing permanent except change. One had only to read through the brochure for the 2003 Information Online Conference to get a feel for the changes we as librarians are facing on the professional and organizational levels. Sessions on providing

- Virtual Reference Services, 24 hours, seven days;
- Using E-learning to implement distributed authoring of Metadata (anybody else say "What?" ?);
- Electronic books;
- E-Journals;
- Database integration and Consortia tips.

As long as our clientele are members of the global community with an awareness of all that that brings, we cannot ignore the changes, but we can manage them. This brings me back to the innovative librarian.

When changes come, Drucker suggests that innovations can focus these changes to benefit the organization's purpose and potential.³ There was the choice to put the collection back the way it was - there was the risk that what we came out with would not be better than the arrangement we had, and that at the end of the process there would be 1000 or so books looking for a home. But there wasn't and we achieved a good outcome for the library. Planning is an essential part of the innovation process.

Innovation is not necessarily only related to when significant changes come in



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financial, physical and temporal resources - change can be precipitated by taking a closer look at smaller, routine areas and innovations introduced - for example:

- How well are the basic systems of the library working?
- Does the reservation system deliver the books when needed?
- Is the renewal/overdue system effective in reducing the number of overdue notices that have to be generated?
- Does the signage around the library help the user?
- Are there guides to the standard reference works in their field for the new students?
- Is the catalogue user friendly?
- Do the students know about the databases available?
- Is the atmosphere of the library welcoming and is the staff approachable?

We can bring innovation into any area of the library service, because it only takes the time to step back occasionally and really look at how things are going. The time to talk to the library users, the time to observe how the well the library is serving the goals of its institution.

Refining, adapting and distilling ideas, despite the limitations presented by our environment, is the essence of innovation in one-person librarianship.⁴

But beware - it's not change for change's sake, and innovations which may work well in other places may not be suited to the needs of other clientele.

Sweeping away the past for the sake of a delusionary future, is as futile as clinging to the past for the sake of the past.⁵

Conversely, the "if it's not broken...." attitude also may not apply. 'It' may need a new coat of paint, or a better wheel, or to be traded in for a new model altogether. Innovation is firstly about seeing clearly in

our own situation and secondly about imagining it differently. When opportunities are then presented or created the innovative librarian is ready, or at least open to the possibilities.

A useful study of innovation in Australian University and TAFE libraries was undertaken by Alan Bundy in 2000 and concludes that:

Academic libraries often lead their institutions in areas such as client service and feedback, staff development and asserting the importance of information literacy. Imaginative leadership in innovation can, and should, be another of their contributions. However this first requires more libraries to develop a specific vision of innovation, because it is this which will strongly influence the culture of the library, resources for innovation and those responsible for its innovation.⁶

Moving libraries from one place to another, or just in circles in the same place, has given me a flexible outlook to library services, "a vision for innovation", in Alan Bundy's words. It is a way of seeing that is open to all of us and innovations made in the simplest of library routines can have productive and satisfying results in terms of client satisfaction and library efficiency.

"Transform the way we do business"⁷ is Neil McLean's advice to librarians who wish to take up the challenges of the changes that have and will continue to come to our profession. Transformation is foundational to the doctrine of the places we serve, and I believe it to be no less essential to the provision of an innovative and relevant library service in those places.

References

¹ Clayton, Peter (1997) *Implementation of organizational innovations: studies of academic and research libraries*. San Diego: Academic Press, p.2

² *ibid.*

³ Jennings, L, Jones, G & O'Brien, L (1990). *Productivity, innovation and structure*. Papers presented at the Australian Library and Information Association 1st Biennial Conference. Perth. Applecross, W.A: Promaco Conventions, p.392

⁴ Malkin, Carolyn & Leibler, Arnold Bloch (1999) *One-person libraries: islands or innovators?* 8th Asia-Pacific Specials, Health and Law Librarians Conference. <http://www.alia.org.au/conferences/shllc/1999/papers/malkin.html> 14/01/03. p.6

⁵ Crawford, Walt & Gorman, Michael. (1995). *Future libraries: dreams, madness & reality*. Chicago: American Library Association, p.1

⁶ Bundy, Alan. (2000). *Forward with imagination: innovative library client services for the 21st century*. Paper presented at Virtual Libraries: virtual communities Annual Conference of the International Association of Technological University Libraries. <http://www.library.unisa.edu.au/papers/forward.htm> 14/01/03, p.14

⁷ McLean, Neil. (1996). "Reading the future: access and technology" in *Reading the Future: proceedings of the biennial conference of the Australian Library and Information Association, Melbourne*. Canberra, ACT: Aust. Library and Information Assoc, p.20

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