**Libraries of the Future**

Clayton Christensen, professor at Harvard Business School, first popularized the idea of “disruptive innovation” in his 1997 book “The Innovator’s Dilemma.” A disruptive innovation is an innovation that helps create a new market and value network, and eventually disrupts an existing market and value network (over a few years or decades.)

Let’s dig into a little bit:

It initially offers a lower performance according to what the mainstream market has historically demanded. BUT, it also provides some new performance attributes, which in turn makes the innovation popular. As it improves along the traditional performance parameters it eventually displaces the former technology.

A great example is the telephone. When mobile phones appeared they were big and clunky, had poor sound quality and were more expensive than land lines. What they offered was portability. As mobile phones developed, they became smaller and cheaper, and the sound quality improved, and new functions were added – they eventually replaced the old analog telephone.

So why am I talking about disruption? Anybody have a guess?

Absolutely! Libraries are experiencing disruption.

I know that you don’t need convincing – just look at the steady decline of reference questions. (Warning: It’s going to sound like I’m beating up on reference today. I’m just using it as an example, a metaphor if you will, for the larger library landscape.)

The Association of **Research Libraries** has reported a **75%** decline in reference questions in all ARL libraries between 1995 and 2015. *In NC* ***public libraries*** *they have steadily dropped year by year by 50% since 2009.* One of THE traditional roles of librarians (providing factual and correct answers to individual questions) has been disrupted. What are people turning to? I will just mention that Google is seeing continuous (and explosive) growth over the same time period.

Libraries are not the only ones being disrupted – think about the music industry and now the publishing industry! Who even knows what “books” will look like in 5 or 10 years! Much less how people will access them! Will they buy or subscribe or rent or lease or borrow or …. what? The future of books and their ecosystem is a critical question for libraries.

Next up – the education sector is experiencing changes – from flipped classrooms, online classes and degree programs, to blended learning and MOOCs or Massively Open Online Courses. Some predict that the current practice of higher education is going to be massively disrupted in the near future.

Whew!

Librarians have been dealing with disruption for some time now. We used to be the only game in town, but now we have competition. Technology and the Internet are changing the very nature of what we do. While this is a threat it also presents opportunities – and that is what I want to talk about today.

As you all know - some of the library’s most traditional roles are being co-opted by others.

• Let’s go back to those reference questions. More than 20 years ago librarians from around the country gathered at Duke University to “rethink reference.” These participants identified areas of reference services that would decline or disappear. One of the areas identified was:

the **‘sit and wait’** reference model.

Given the change in use statistics, this makes sense doesn’t it?

The number of reference questions in MANY libraries is dropping. How are libraries dealing with that? ARE libraries dealing with that?

I was recently fortunate to be able to attend PLA in Denver. When I toured the Denver Public Library I was interested to see empty staff desks. Empty except for a sign saying “Librarian is on the move – please use the ‘Ask-a-librarian’ phone” with a big arrow pointing to a phone on a nearby column. I felt like I was in one of those “big box” stores like Home Depot or Target. What a MUCH better use of staff time given the change in reference! BUT – I bet we all know of libraries that still schedule staff to sit at the reference desk. Change is not easy!

• For years the library brand has pretty much been “Books.” Publishers used to be some of our biggest partners. These days they are struggling just to define what a “book” IS / trying to find a workable e-book pricing model for libraries. There’s a new one every 6 months it seems. While posing real challenges for publishers – this disruption provides a huge opportunity for self-publishing. The middle-man is no longer a requisite and authors have many more avenues to reach readers on their own.

• Finally – last example. How many times you have heard “Oh are there still libraries? I thought they were obsolete! Isn’t everything on the web?”

The disruption is real. Libraries are being impacted and our partners are too. How are we responding to this disruption? In an interesting variety of ways actually!

You can see it as a threat – and some library staff DO. They talk about “survival” and “coping” – defensive strategies that seem anchored in the faint hope that if we can just hunker down and passively wait out the storm, maybe things will improve someday – this THREAT will go away. To me – this mindset reveals a defeatist attitude, one in which we take no ownership, and have no power over our future. It shows a lack of vision and creativity about the important role libraries play in our communities. We are seriously underestimating ourselves when we take this attitude.

You could call this the “They’re going to miss us when we’re gone” strategy! Except that really is NOT a strategy!

I find this VERY alarming because I think our very future is at stake. We are living in a new era and I fear that libraries could disappear if we are not vigilant.

Fortunately…

There are library staff who are responding more creatively by looking for ways to address and even capitalize on these disruptive forces. You could say they are responding by being a little disruptive themselves!

You can see disruption as an opportunity

A great example of this is the development and deployment of open source software – including Evergreen! This is certainly not a traditional role for library staff and libraries! And yet the use of open source software can yield huge benefits to libraries. At a minimum it might save us a little money. It leads to the creation of a community of adopters dedicated to mutual support and development. It provides increased opportunities for library staff to grow and develop new skills as they contribute to the evolution of the software. And it puts US – the librarian! – in the driver’s seat so that WE have the power. That sounds pretty disruptive to me!

So how can we encourage more of this willful disruption on the part of libraries and librarians? How can we see the opportunities and develop new strategies?

I would say that Rule #1 for doing this would be “No more business as usual.” So the **first** order of business is that we have to change our way of thinking and realize and ACCEPT the times we live in. This is harder to do than it looks! “Hunkering down” and waiting for things to go back to the way they were is NOT a strategy. Believe me!

Change can be VERY hard to accommodate. For some people frankly it will be close to impossible. It is easy to see this change in the library landscape as a giant “bait & switch.” HEY!!! I became a librarian to do reader’s advisory or to answer reference questions or to ….. “ any one of a hundred things. The fact is that we HAVE to accept the changing times or libraries will surely be extinct

Once we can get over THIS hurdle (and it is a HUGE one) then we are ready to start thinking creatively about what libraries can be in the future and how we can get there.

First – let’s set the stage.

Libraries exist as parts of larger systems. Public libraries are part of cities and counties; school media centers are part of a school system and academic libraries are part of their college or university. Almost no library stands alone.

These larger host systems created the libraries and they sustain them. Libraries rise and fall as their host systems rise and fall.

For our libraries to thrive we must understand the library’s host system.

* Why does it exist?
* What is its mission?
* What does it mean to be good or effective within that system?
* What does the system value?
* Who controls resource allocation in the library’s host system?
* What influences them?

Understanding our host systems is essential if we are to be vital components of their whole.

Every library employee should know 3 crucial things about the library’s host system: its mission, its structure, and its history. It’s important to understand the priorities of the city, the university, the school. How can you do this? Listening to the host system’s leaders is one way. Ask questions. Observe. We can also read reports, scout websites, even read the local paper!

While you are at it - it is also important to understand the host system’s power structures, both formal and informal. Power in organizations is not always distributed according to the organizational chart. You will be more effective if you understand how the system works in

YOUR host institution. Who really makes the decisions?

Digression here:

One of my heroes is Stephen Dubner of “Freakonomics” fame. (I highly recommend his podcast – a great way to stretch your brain!)

Dubner has this to say about public libraries:

*“There is nothing about the library’s continuing strength that was foreordained. Like a lot of institutions, it is to a degree the product of an accident of history. If a relatively small group of people hadn’t decided, many years ago, that the public library was an institution that deserved funding, and tending, and recognition, would we still have them? If, that is, the library were an idea that was proposed anew today, would it come into existence? I’m not so sure. Can you imagine the conversation with the publishers? “*Yes, we’d like to buy one copy of your book and then let 1,000 people read it, for free.” *Ha!*

Dubner’s comments are a good reminder that libraries were set up and organized in a different era. As you think about and observe your host institutions, we also need to remember the past and how things have changed in libraries. This will help us think about how they might continue to change in the future.

* In the past resources were scarce and attention was abundant. Now, attention is scarce and resources are abundant.
* In the past users/learners would build their workflow around the library. Now the library must build its services around the user workflow. The library has to think about how to get into those flows. Let me repeat this – the library has to figure out how to insert itself INTO its user’s workflows.
* Libraries used to acquire and manage static collections. Now we are looking at licensing materials and data curation. We are managing more diverse collections in more diverse ways.
* Most libraries function as bureaucracies. By their very nature their main organizational goal is to maintain their current system. Bureaucracies are not change-oriented systems! Stability and a shared understanding of function are qualities a bureaucracy.

So - How are libraries going to survive (or even thrive) in these changing times?

* As mentioned – a more enterprising (disruptive) mentality is required. A mindset in which the structures change to meet changing goals. The ways that libraries operate HAVE to be reshaped to meet those changing goals. An example: While our focus has traditionally been on the collection as a resource, we need to start paying more attention to the staff as a resource for the community. Never forget, the library is a growing organism.

We have already started changing our structures. I will tell you a secret. When I visit a library, ANY library, I always make it a habit to check out the reference collection. Is it huge – taking up space on multiple ranges of shelving? Or is it small? My preconception is that smaller is better. Those libraries that are keeping up with the times and are trying to be agile are the ones that have weeded their reference collections.

* Libraries and librarians have to position themselves. We need to start paying attention to marketing, assessment, using data. We need to understand the changing nature of publishing, the dynamics of social networks, and about writing / communicating on the web. If libraries are to be seen as expert then that expertise must be seen. User engagement, marketing, outreach and assessment are all skills we need to employ to make that happen.
* While we are at it – we also need to talk the language of our host institutions or our political milieu, to be able to communicate about library value in the context of public values.

Another digression: For years libraries have been using statistics to prove their value. We measure the size of our collections, the number of people who walk through our doors, the number of reference questions we answer. We are the ones who have been saying “Look! See what a great job we’re doing? Our numbers are going UP!” Oops! We’ve been using these measures because they reflect our focus on collections AND because they are easy to collect. What do we do now – as these numbers are dropping? It’s getting harder to communicate the true value of what we do.

* Negotiation, business planning, and budgeting are important, but so is change management, organizational learning and development, cultural transformation, and project management. Working with staff to evolve roles is crucial. Libraries must be more enterprising and less bureaucratic.
* Above all it is important to understand that our goals must dictate the means we use to achieve them. We cannot keep doing things the same old way just because we have always done it that way. We have to look for opportunities FOR the library. We have to scan our host institutions and environments, and work to position the library as a key player both now and in the future. We need to look for ways to insure that the library survives the disruption to its market and value network. As Charles Darwin said: “The species that survive are not necessarily the smartest or fastest, but the ones who best adapt.” Libraries that are adapting are thriving.

Easy for me to say – right? What are some things that you can actually DO to help insure that libraries survive in the future?

Here are five suggestions for how to navigate this change.

1. Focus on **relationships**, not transactions. Traditional reference is a transactional operation. The reference desk is where transactions happen. Somebody asks a question, the librarian gives an answer. The interaction has a beginning, a middle, and an end. We need to move to a more relational mindset. Not just for reference – but for any and all library services. One interaction leads to the next, and it just keeps going and going, with increased mutual understanding and collaboration as the interactions accumulate. Relationships will be key to taking on this new role. You have to know your community and they have to know you.
2. We need to **specialize** – or at least not try to be all things to all people. Maybe one reason others have a hard time defining the library is because we haven’t done a very good job of doing that ourselves! We librarians like to think of ourselves as generalists. As I mentioned already – if we are taking on new roles and spending time developing relationships we are going to have to STOP doing something else. There is no library program no matter how little used – that somebody doesn’t LOVE! That does not mean that you have to keep offering that service indefinitely. Use the time you gain to develop specialized knowledge - to learn your community. Do you understand the dynamics of your organization and host system – how things get done and by whom? If you have this knowledge – have you put it use for the benefit of your library?
3. We need to get **OUT** of the library. The traditional library model has the librarian at the center, running the library, and patrons had to come TO the library. Remember the “sit and wait” model of reference? The librarian needs to get OUT of the library and fully engage with others in the community. This engagement can be virtual as well as physical. We will never get a seat at the table if we are unknown in our larger communities. Our communities will never know what the library is and does if we don’t go out and tell them. We may THINK we know our communities but are you SURE? You will know them better if you engage with them. Use your relationships to figure out what you can do that will help your community the most. You want to insure that the library’s goals are aligned with the customer’s values and that you are offering the goods and services that your community needs. NOTE – in public libraries our customers do NOT want a perfectly cataloged book. They DO want that best seller to be on the shelf as quickly as humanly possible!
4. **Build alliances or partnerships**. This is a matter of creating an alliance or partnership with your community, NOT just delivering service to them. It isn’t words – it’s a whole mindset. We need to expand our **job definitions**. Traditional librarians focused on being a service provider. Service is in our professional DNA. And that’s not all bad. These days librarians have to go beyond just providing service – they have to be team partners. That means they define their role more broadly. They do whatever they can to be contributing members to their host institutions and communities. An excellent example of this is the Ferguson Public Library that hosted classes in the library when the public schools closed. Not your typical library role – right?

Here's an example from right here in North Carolina. I visited a public library in a teeny town, population @ 300. This place was hopping! There were all ages in there from grandmothers through teens and little kids, the library was bursting at the seams. I saw a sign advertising a clothing exchange. Hunh!?!?! Every August (right before the new school year starts) the library sponsors a “Hand-me-Down” clothing exchange. IT is VERY popular and brings lots of families into the library. Families that may not ordinarily visit the library. Not exactly a library service – is it? But it is something that serves the community.

1. **Last, pay attention**. Read trade journals, watch the local news, talk to your colleagues about the changing landscape. Increasingly traditional library services have become a commodity. They have been usurped by the for-profit sector and are taken for granted. We have to find new value in new roles. What will these roles be in YOUR community?

So – to recap. In today’s environment the library staff person:

* Builds strong working relationships with others in their communities to achieve shared community goals
* Has, or acquires, the knowledge necessary to do this
* Engages with individuals and groups wherever and whenever to ensure effective collaboration
* Adopts the goals and objectives of their host institutions & communities and defines their responsibility as helping achieve community goals – not just providing library or information services.
* Is able to add value to the host institution & community by applying sophisticated professional skills related to information – skills that are unique to the librarian in the group!

And there’s one more thing. As a result of doing all these things, the librarian is a very visible and highly valued member of the organization. Too many times I’ve hear a library staff member lament how unrecognized and undervalued they are. Too often I’ve heard the refrain “If only they understood what we do…”

If your boss or county manager or superintendent doesn’t understand what you do – that is YOUR problem not his or hers. If we are seeing the opportunities and positioning ourselves as strategic partners in our organizations and communities, then our work will be visible and immediate. If we are taking on new roles and truly addressing the goals of our communities and organizations our work WILL be seen. If we are hunkered down waiting for people to beat a path to our door – I’m afraid we will be waiting a long time. Or perhaps just a short time – until others decide FOR us that the library is irrelevant, or a nice amenity to have but something that we just can’t afford in this economy.

I want to pause here and mention that the State Library wants to help you navigate these choppy waters. As you know we already award LSTA grants to support digitization, literacy and lifelong learning, and planning in North Carolina libraries. For the coming year we are going to add a new category to test out and we have NO idea if this will work or not. We are experimenting and trying to be agile ourselves! I’m not even sure what the grant category will be called: right now we’re calling it “Pitch and idea” or “Bright idea.” So what is this grant all about? We’re asking YOU to tell us! The purpose is to offer some fertile ground on which to cultivate ideas for tomorrow. We recognize that the best ideas come from you all and do not always fit neatly into our existing grant categories. This program is open to any idea that does not fit into one of our categories but that also meets our overarching goals for the program. As I say this is an experiment! (So we WILL be asking for feedback once we try it out this year!)

The deadline for applications will be this fall so it is not too early to start brainstorming!

*Categories:*

*Digitization*

*Literacy & Lifelong Learning*

*Planning*

*Goals:*

*Partnerships & Collaboration*

*Continuing Education*

*Literacy & Lifelong Learning*

*Access, Digitization & Preservation*

Back to our regularly scheduled program.

The real goal here is to be seen as essential. By making ourselves indispensable – we are ensuring that the library does not get displaced.

It’s up to you. You can hunker down and hope the disruption passes you by. Good luck with that. Or you can set goals, embed yourself in the strategic priorities of your organization and help it to achieve success in the new environment. Computer scientist Alan Kay is famous for coining this phrase “The best way to predict the future is to invent it.” The opportunity is there. I wish you the best as you tackle it!

Thank you.