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A Different Kind of Embedded Librarian:

More than Just a New Office

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of colleges and universities are embracing the concept of the embedded librarian. The goal is to put librarians into the physical space where students and faculty are most likely to encounter them rather than waiting for patrons to come to the library. This article asks if just doing the same thing differently is enough. A different kind of embedded librarian may be needed – one who has a regular teaching load in a curricular discipline, thereby better connecting the library with the classroom end of delivering the educational mission to the benefit of everyone.

An Overview of Embedded Librarianship

A concept that has emerged in the library world the last few years is that of the embedded librarian. University libraries have been sending some of their librarians to occupy offices outside the library, embedding them in various departments around campus (Kolowich, 2010). A good definition of the concept is provided by Carlson and Kneale (2011): “Embedded librarianship takes a librarian out of the context of the traditional library and places him or her in an ‘on-site’ setting or situation that enables co-ordination and collaboration with researchers or teaching faculty” (p. 167). The idea is that if faculty and students no longer come to the library, the library needs to go to them. Embedding in an academic department situates the participating librarians as visible colleagues of faculty members and makes them more accessible to the faculty members and the students who come to ask said faculty for help with their research. Taking this concept a step further, librarians have also been embedded into specific classes, teaching research and writing skills alongside regular faculty in discipline specific research skills courses. Some examples of this approach are discussed by Manus (2009) and Hall (2008). Perhaps even more common is embedding librarians as an additional instructor for online courses, where they become full participants via course-management software. Examples of this approach are given by Owens (2008) and Ramsay and Kinnie (2006). In the research university setting described by Carlson and Kneale, the librarian becomes a full member of the research team (2011).

However, does simply moving a librarian’s office or dropping them into a research skills course as a co-instructor substantively change the way students and librarians interact? Will the way the library is viewed and used by students be significantly altered by

implementation of an embedded librarian plan as described above? If the goal of embedding a librarian in an academic department is to simply increase the visibility of the librarian to faculty and the eager students who actually visit faculty offices, then that will likely be met easily enough. If the goal of embedding a librarian in a research skills course is to simply take library instruction sessions and graft them into a required course so that all students are “reached” by library instruction, that, too, is accomplished with an embedded librarian of this sort.

But what if the goal of embedding a librarian were more than that – more than just a new office? What if the goal is to build a better bridge between the library and the educational mission of the college, making the librarian a fuller participant in the fulfilment of the educational mission? Then a different kind of embedding is likely called for. The literature on embedded librarianship strives to point out how this arrangement brings the library-specific skill set of librarians to a new setting, increasing “the value proposition of librarians” (Carson & Kneale, 2011, p. 170). This approach could build a certain kind of bridge between educational mission and library, but could there be a better one? What if the librarian brought not just library-specific, but also subject expertise to the relationship while bringing classroom teaching experience and a faculty perspective back to the library?

A New Kind of Embedded Librarian

At Briercrest College and Seminary the librarian has been “embedded” for the past three years in the faculty of arts and sciences. Not just as a co-instructor teaching research skills, but teaching one or two history of Christianity survey courses each year. What follows are some thoughts on how this might be one way forward for librarians looking to better link what they do to the educational

mission of the schools they find themselves in, along with the challenges of making this a reality.

There are a number of advantages in developing a role where the same person is both librarian and a faculty member with a teaching load. One of these is the visibility issue that motivates the change of office location mentioned above. Students would hopefully see the librarian as more than just “that person in the library” who helps them find books, but as someone who is fully engaged in delivering the education they are paying for. It’s not that librarians don’t already help provide an education, but student perceptions of the link between library and education are often not as explicit as librarians might like. Some librarians might even admit that in reality the link isn’t as strong as it ought to be. And more than just visibility and perception, the goal should be to actually establish a more explicit link between the library and the classroom.

The visibility and reputation of the librarian is not the only way the library itself can benefit from this kind of arrangement. If the librarian is engaged in the classroom, that experience will inform other work and decisions in the library. It keeps the librarian in touch with the realities of the classroom and the workings of a particular faculty or department. It also provides the librarian with a voice within that faculty in a way that a token membership on a faculty senate often does not. It’s not that librarians don’t understand the classroom or how students learn. In fact, many librarians have much to offer faculty members in this regard. However, there is a perspective that comes from regularly teaching a course of one’s own that is valuable to the library. This can also pay dividends in access to others’ classrooms for research instruction, as well as earning a place at the table when educational matters that affect library mission and operation are under discussion by faculty bodies. This arrangement can also break down the sometimes default positioning of us/them between the library and faculty.

This kind of fully embedded librarianship should be beneficial to the faculty or department the librarian is placed in, as well as being beneficial to the library. However, the ultimate beneficiaries should be the students. Librarians care about student learning, careful research, using sources well, inspiring lifelong learners, arousing curiosity that leads to independent study, and the list goes on. These are important attributes for someone undertaking to enter the college classroom. Librarians are also by necessity generalists who have been forced by the nature of their work to know something about everything. In the course of answering reference questions from students and faculty across a school’s curriculum, the librarian becomes familiar with aspects of various disciplines in a way that faculty members focused on plumbing the depths of their discipline may not be. In my experience there have been serendipitous moments when something learned in the course of helping a student with an assignment in a completely different discipline has proven valuable in my history courses. Students benefit from having a mixture of polymaths, specialists, and generalists in the classroom. Adding librarians to the teaching roster can add value by bringing further diversity to the mix of faculty.

In an age when colleges and universities are increasingly relying on adjunct and part-time faculty to fill out teaching rosters, the research of Landrum (2009) has demonstrated that in areas like teaching evaluations and grade distribution, part-time faculty perform similarly to full-time faculty despite the inferior support mechanisms for those not in full-time roles. Having part-time faculty who are nonetheless engaged full-time in the educational life of the institution should be desirable over part-time faculty who are otherwise uninvolved in the learning community. If adjuncts and part-time faculty are being considered by a dean, a librarian already present might be part of the best solution.

Another beneficiary should be the librarians who participate in these programs. All this

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- assumes qualifications and interest on the part of librarians engaging in such an arrangement. In my case a master’s degree in historical theology provided the (minimal) credential, and teaching was part of what drew me to academia to begin with. Not every librarian would find this an attractive proposition, but there are some for whom this kind of blend between library and classroom is an ideal arrangement, and a second graduate degree in a teachable discipline makes the combination feasible should the institution allow it.
- In short: libraries benefit by gaining librarians with a teaching faculty perspective; academic departments benefit by gaining library perspective; both benefit by building bridges between them; and, ultimately, students benefit from a more diverse range of faculty and a more cohesive delivery of the educational mission. At least that’s the goal.
- ### The Challenges
- There are, of course, challenges that come with this kind of arrangement. An increased workload for the librarian involved goes without saying. The demands of the classroom, along with preparation and grading, are now responsibilities on top of regular library duties. The time management challenge this presents is obvious.
- Also, the demands of two sometimes very different professional worlds provide challenges beyond simple time management. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ himself warned that no one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24), but being both a librarian and a member of the teaching faculty can seem like an attempt to do just that. Not only does the librarian need to stay current on library literature and trends, but also in the teaching discipline. The librarian in this kind of arrangement is unlikely to be the leading expert in a second discipline, churning out several journal articles and a monograph every year. While that level of disciplinary mastery is not needed for teaching one or two survey courses, the challenge remains to be current and competent in two professions. Thus, the competing demands for time and attention can easily lead to the feeling that one is mastering neither role.
- A final challenge may be the acceptance of this kind of fully embedded librarian by the academic administration and other faculty members. Broad support and collegiality go a long way in making this work. Granted, without the support of administration this arrangement simply wouldn’t happen, but the collegiality of faculty within the department is equally important in setting the librarian up for success. If librarians were to embrace this as one possible way forward for our profession within academic settings, we would need to seek the support of others within our colleges and universities.
- Librarians are familiar with the various pressures on the profession to change and adapt to new dynamics. Within higher education, a number of proposals have been made to better demonstrate the value of what librarians already do. The practice of embedding librarians is one such proposal. Others, like Joseph McDonald (2011), have bemoaned that “the rise of professionalization with and in the library and its workers has over the years led to increasing distance between the collection and management of this learning content and those charged with teaching and mastering it” (p. 142). The librarian as teaching faculty deserves consideration as a way forward in academic settings both big and small to both adapt to new realities and break down the “silos” that naturally form over time in academia, addressing the concerns of both groups. Some institutions might even be so bold as to reverse the process and have one or more full-time teaching faculty transition into a role that carries some library responsibility. When the right candidates are present and there is openness to creativity within the institution, embedding a librarian or two can mean much more than just a new office. †