

Designing a new librarianship

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Abstract: This column proposes the idea that the field of librarianship should be reconsidered as a design-based discipline, rather than as a social science.

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Like many of you reading this, I became a librarian because I wanted to help people by solving information problems. So I did what many of us in library work do: I studied the field of librarianship and earned a degree in library science. Or so my piece of paper says. Increasingly, though, I realize that despite the name and approach of our field, the kinds of problems librarians solve are not fundamentally scientific. For a variety of reasons, including the attempt to raise the profession to its proper dignity, American librarianship framed itself as a science in the early part of the 20th century, and has clung to the label “library science” ever since. While scientific methods can certainly shed light on useful data like circulation rates, patron behaviors, and user satisfaction, they also reflect a specific mindset and professional point of view—one that omits a fundamental aspect of library work. While librarians undoubtedly need scientific data to guide decisions, the majority of what most librarians really do is make things. Making things is the realm of design, not science.

Design is a fundamentally different approach to the world, requiring its own “designerly way of knowing” (Cross 2011). In general, science is a way of conceptualizing and forming knowledge about the *natural* world, using observation and experimentation to explain and predict things that occur in nature. In contrast, design is concerned with the *artificial* world, which involves the creation of knowledge and meaning by people making things to solve problems (Simon 1996). If we look at the fundamental goals of the American library profession, its ultimate purpose is neither to conduct research nor to uncover new data that reveals insights about information interactions and experiences. I would argue that this would be the realm of information science, which is certainly closely aligned—but not synonymous—with librarianship. Although librarians draw on such knowledge, what libraries and librarians really aim to do is create tools and services to unite people with information. A glance at

the things librarians do on a daily basis—writing catalog records and metadata, planning events and programs, delivering storytimes, developing information literacy curricula, just to name a few—reveals that the majority of what most librarians really do is *create*. The underlying purpose of librarianship is to design tools and services to unite people with information. Given this emphasis on creation, it seems evident that librarianship is less about science (discovering and understanding the world) and more about design (making things that solve problems in the world).

Despite the centrality of design to library work, librarianship is not traditionally considered a design profession, and the idea of design in librarianship is typically relegated to narrow conceptualizations, like architecture (see the *American Libraries'* annual Library Design Showcase) or technology (notably the all-too-familiar website redesign project). Even recent interest in user experience (UX) design is often limited to technological projects and interior wayfinding. Yet, design is not limited to these areas. Design is the creation of anything: the Dewey Decimal Classification system, the early Washington County (MD) book-wagon delivery service, the MARC format for storing and sharing bibliographic data, precision-crafted DIALOG searches, pathfinders and LibGuides for topical resources—these all are examples of design. From the catalog of the first public library to today's makerspaces, I can't think of a single thing in libraries that isn't design.

Librarians have been designing and will continue to design every day. Most, unfortunately, are unaware that what they are actually doing is design work. With rare exception, most library design is implicit, as librarians are making things but doing so without a systematic, purposeful design approach. Other purveyors of information services, from library vendors to services like Google and Wikipedia, frame their work as acts of creation, which over time has shifted creative power and recognition away from libraries. If librarians do not consider themselves creators, then they have to

procure tools and services from those that do create, perhaps at a cost to library finances or even library values. Patrons are themselves shifting from being information consumers to being information creators. How, then, can librarians teach and support others to become makers if we do not understand making ourselves?

It's time for librarians to reframe librarianship as a design profession, focusing on designing tools and services that solve people's information problems. This may prove challenging for many librarians, as the underlying philosophy and knowledge of design are so different from the traditional scientific mindset in which most librarians have been trained. Many libraries are embracing the idea of "design thinking," which involves a process model intended to help people in other fields think and work like designers. Resources like the *Design Thinking for Libraries toolkit* (<http://designthinkingforlibraries.com>) can be a great starting point, but changing the library profession requires more than just a single process model. The design thinking toolkit and similar resources are a springboard, but they're not enough. As a discipline, design offers numerous theoretical, philosophical, and methodological approaches beyond the basic design thinking model. It's time for new approaches in MLIS programs, based on design studio education; for new library management that supports the iteration, prototyping—and yes, even failure—inherent to design; and for new venues for research communication and dissemination that recognize and encourage design forms of knowledge in addition to traditional social science research methodologies. It's time for a new librarianship that echoes the field's true purpose: creating tools and services that connect people with information. Only a new generation of designer-librarians can make that happen.

References

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