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# Participating in the Conversation

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## Participating in the Conversation

With this second issue of the *Student Research Journal* I begin a new adventure. Well into Plan C at this point in my career as a library professional, I have worked in academic libraries, edited a well-known professional journal, helped launch a second one, and am now returning to the academy for my doctoral studies. In between, there was a period in which I had “opted out,” choosing to disengage from the line of work which had both nurtured and challenged me for over twenty years. I stepped away from the conversation. Re-entry has brought me face to face with a profession which has continued to evolve at a dizzying pace and yet remains fundamentally recognizable.

What has kept the core of library and information science intact, I believe, is the manner in which its practitioners and scholars engage constantly in conversation. From the old days of printed journals, newsletters, and flyers to those of listservs, early e-mail, chat rooms and Mosaic, and on to the current heady mixture of virtual conferences, wiki-everything, RSS feeds, blogs and tweets, librarians have ever engaged each other, their communities, parent institutions, and the people they serve in an on-going and vibrant conversation. The sole professional in a small, rural public library may share her ideas for a better way to launch a new young adult service in any number of print and electronic venues. A full professor of library and information studies directing the research of a team of doctoral students, may urge them to share their findings through poster sessions, presentations at virtual conferences, and scholarly journals. Whatever the format, whether practitioner-based or scholarly, librarians maintain an active discourse.

What *has* changed is the degree to which the profession and the world around it has become increasingly participatory in nature. Over the years, the role of librarians has evolved from that of “handmaidens to scholarship” to “gatekeepers of knowledge” and now to “facilitators of content creation.” Our new challenge is to find ways in which to encourage and accommodate a more inclusive participation in the creation of knowledge. R. David Lankes (2008), a professor at Syracuse University’s School of Information Studies and director of the Information Institute of Syracuse, has written extensively on the issue of participatory librarianship:

“As knowledge is developed through conversation, and libraries facilitate this process, libraries have a powerful impact on the knowledge generated. Can librarians interfere with and shape conversations? Absolutely. Should we? We can’t help it. Our collections, our reference work, our mere presence will influence conversations. The question is, in what ways? (p. 235)

Lankes speaks of a “new librarianship” emerging which is centered on community and knowledge creation. He tells us that the true role of librarians is to

facilitate learning and that it is this essential role which compels us to constantly adjust the way in which we do our work (Lankes, 2011).

This issue of *SRJ* speaks eloquently to the theme of participatory librarianship. In his invited contribution, Dr. Michael Stephens (2011), assistant professor at San José State University's School of Library and Information Science (SLIS), argues in favor of greater professional and scholarly involvement on the part of LIS graduate students while they are still in school. He uses the image of the "walled garden" to describe the protected and, at times, isolating nature of the traditional library school education and urges a wider participation in the scholarly conversation. "Learning leads to sharing which leads to teaching which leads to more learning. Moving beyond the walled garden and into the constant streams of conversation enables an understanding of participation that cannot be imparted within a closed environment" (Stephens, 2011, p. 5). From publishing research articles in journals such as *SRJ* to exchanging tweets with practicing professionals, blogging for sites such as Hack Library School (<http://hacklibschool.wordpress.com/>), and sharing the products of their course work in e-portfolios, today's LIS students have myriad opportunities for contributing to and shaping the conversation. Dr. Stephens ends his essay with a description of those qualities which new graduates ought to embody: an attitude of lifelong learning (especially as it relates to technology) along with a willingness to share, teach, and participate throughout their careers.

In her article, "Health Literacy: An Overview of an Emerging Field," Mary Grace Flaherty raises an important question about the role of librarians:

Public libraries have a history of offering a variety of programs to promote early literacy and adult literacy, and are now expanding services in some cases to include digital and financial literacy. Another type of literacy or skill set is coming to the forefront and has a significant impact on individuals' lives and well-being: health literacy. Do libraries and librarians have a role to play in this newly emerging field of literacy? (Flaherty, 2011, p. 1)

Flaherty's article examines different definitions of this topic and tackles the somewhat controversial issue of measuring health literacy and the shortcomings of the tools currently available for this task. A fundamental problem, we learn, lies in the overarching impact of low levels of literacy in today's society. There has been a great deal of research grant funding and promulgation at an interdisciplinary level with major organizations such as the National Institute of Health, the American Medical Association, the National Library of Medicine, and the Medical Library Association among others focused on health literacy in the past twenty years. Flaherty discusses the urgent need for librarians to engage in partnerships, community outreach efforts, and to launch advocacy campaigns on

behalf of their users. Librarians and information scientists can collaborate with medical professionals, scholars, and policy makers in defining not only the scholarship in the field but its practical applications as well (Flaherty, 2011). It would seem, then, that the role of libraries in promoting health literacy is yet another way in which the profession can participate in the conversation.

Mary Grace Flaherty is currently a doctoral candidate and IMLS fellow at Syracuse University's iSchool. She received her MLS from the University of Maryland, and her MS in Applied Behavioral Science from Johns Hopkins University. Ms. Flaherty's research interests include consumer health information, public libraries, and health literacy.

In “#Socialtagging: Defining its Role in the Academic Library,” Annalise Ammer and Katherine Bertel (2011) explore the tension between the traditional practice of authority control in cataloging and the more recent phenomenon of social tagging generated by library users as a new form of manual indexing from multiple points of view. Will the widespread practice of user-generated social tagging be a good addition to traditional indexing and knowledge management methodologies? “By incorporating social tagging into the academic library, users have the ability to become more engaged with the creation and dissemination of information through personal or community-based tagging environments” (Ammer & Bertel, 2011, p. 14).

Social tagging, they argue, is not meant to replace traditional controlled vocabularies but used concurrently to expand access to library materials. These user-generated, reusable subject terms can be applied to resources in any media and makes of these users both consumers and contributors. Whether libraries opt for an in-house developed tagging system such as PennTags at the University of Pennsylvania or for an external site such as LibraryThing, librarians will need to actively eliminate barriers and facilitate the process in order to encourage the greatest possible participation in this particular type of content creation. This is the very essence of participatory librarianship.

Katherine Bertel is a current MLS student at the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, with an expected graduation date of May 2012. Her research interests include user-centered library instruction, modern information retrieval, and emerging technologies. She hopes to find a position in an academic library.

Annalise Ammer is currently pursuing her MLS at the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, with an expected graduation date of May 2012. Her research interests include digitization of artifacts and texts, user interface design, and virtual libraries. Upon graduating she hopes to find a position in a digital library setting in either an academic or special library.

The conversation continues with an article by Elena S. Smith, “Power and Practice in Academic Library Materials Selection Paradigms” in which she applies French philosopher Michel Foucault’s theories of power to library acquisitions and collection development. Smith posits a power relationship between library professionals and patrons within the context of different library acquisitions models. Whether a library utilizes traditional collection development methods (in which the power is held closely by the library professionals) or the more participatory, patron driven acquisition methods, each model influences the balance of power within a library setting.

In an academic library, materials acquisition methods are fraught with questions about library finances, collection balance, implementation methods and the apportionment of power. The varying roles of librarians, faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students in the materials selection process reveals that power dynamics exist in library acquisitions methods...” (Smith, 2011, p. 13)

In her conclusion, Smith admits that her study raises more questions than it answers. There are many avenues for continued research into the impact of power relations in the creation of library collections, some of which Smith outlines for us. In doing so, Smith extends the conversation and invites the reader to continue the discussion.

Elena Smith is currently a master's student in San Jose's MLIS program and in CSUS' Public History Program. She has recently taken the Lib 287 Open Source course with Dr. Kovacs and is interning at the CSUS University Archive. Next semester, she will be continuing her internship, working as a library assistant at a local public library, and taking classes on XML and oral history.

The theme of participatory librarianship is also present in Lindsay L. Morrow and Amy Miller’s (2011), “A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words: The Perplexing Problem of Indexing Images.” “The purpose of this paper is to examine the current research surrounding image indexing, identify the implications to the indexing profession, propose a potential solution to increase the retrieval of images, and establish areas in need of further research” (Morrow & Miller, 2011, p. 1).

Morrow and Miller (2011) begin by offering an analysis of the current research on image indexing, a growing challenge to the profession both because of the exponential growth and availability of digital image collections and the inherent subjectivity of the format. They describe the three traditional approaches to image indexing—human indexing, controlled vocabularies, and computer extraction—and outline the drawbacks to each (Morrow and Miller, 2011). They

then propose a new collaborative model for image indexing which would incorporate both traditional indexing methods and user-generated tagging. This kind of collaborative approach using both controlled and uncontrolled or user-generated content would allow the end user to participate in the process and expand access to images for other users. Library users would thus assist in enhancing access for other users. Once again, we see that the “new librarianship” as envisioned by Lankes (2011) will involve not only inclusion but collaboration between the library professionals and the users they serve.

Amy Miller plans on completing her Masters program in Library and Information Studies at the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York this winter. Her research interests include information retrieval, the digital divide, and digital libraries. She hopes to find an archives or an academic library position.

Lindsay Marlow is a recent graduate in Masters of Library and Information Studies from the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. Her research interests include information retrieval, reference in the digital age, and media & marketing. She hopes to find an academic library position or work within a special library.

And so the conversation continues. Lankes’ (2011) mantra, “The mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities,” is plentifully affirmed in each of the articles presented here. Graduate student contributions to the scholarly literature, user-generated tagging to enhance access to library materials in all formats, promotion of health literacy by librarians in collaboration with other professionals, and patron-driven acquisitions models are all different threads of the same conversation. We are all interlocutors in this extraordinary discourse. We hope you enjoy this issue of the *Student Research Journal*. It reflects the dedication and hard work of not only the student authors but a team of student editors, scholars all, who have already begun to participate in a meaningful way.

#### References

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