

Collections Are for Collisions: Let Us Design It into the Experience

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Steven J. Bell, "Collections Are for Collisions: Let Us Design It into the Experience" (2013). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284315233>

Collection Are for Collisions: Let Us Design It into the Experience

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The following is a transcription of a live presentation at the 2013 Charleston Conference. Slides and video are available online at <http://bit.ly/1gQYI91>.

Good morning, everyone. I am Steven. I really appreciate being invited to the Charleston Conference to give this talk this morning. I am one of those first-timers, and when I first received the invitation, part of the challenge for me was deciding what I wanted to talk about because there are so many possibilities. So I do read *Against the Grain*, and I see what is going on here at the conferences, but I thought it might be worth taking some time to dive into some of the past proceedings and see what kinds of things people are talking about. I pretty quickly came to an obvious conclusion. People that come to the Charleston Conference like to talk about collections. You like to talk about sharing collections. You like to talk about acquiring collections. You like to talk about dealing with vendors and licensing when it comes to collections. You like to talk about managing and weeding and a lot of things about collections, so I thought, "Well, maybe I should talk about collections today."

Now, here is the challenge: there are so many different things to talk about, and I thought, "Well, what is a commonality that we all share when it comes to collections?" And it occurred to me that the one thing that binds us all together no matter what we do with collections is we want people to use our collections. Right? Because otherwise all of that other stuff we are doing, if people are not using it, what is the value? When I say "using it" I do not just mean it being there just in case someone wants to use it. I want to think more deeply about how we actually can create collisions with our collections so that people are having an interaction with the collections and people are engaging with the collections, and I think every single person who has worked the library at any time in their life has heard some story about someone who said, "Well, I went to the library, and I discovered this book I was not really even looking for but it really had a huge

impact on me and my life." So I think that is really important, and the problem, the thing that concerns me, is whether we are designing that out of our libraries.

Let me start by showing you a video with a collections theme. I call it "Meeting in the Stacks" (see video at <http://bit.ly/1gQYI91>). So let me tell you about what inspired me to do that video with some of our great students at Temple University. This summer, I was in a cochair of a committee for part of our campus master planning project; we are going through that process right now and looking at what should our campus look like over the next 20 years. Part of that is a new library that will be part of that whole plan. So I cochaired this committee that had about nine faculty on it, and they represented all of the different disciplines, or many of the different disciplines, and they obviously shared some of the things they wanted to see in a library like a special study space or lounge for faculty with a fireplace in it and a lot of food. But the other thing that every single faculty member said is that they want the library to have books. And they also said, "This is important to us because we want the students to be in the library, discovering the finds that will create new mysteries for them that will lead them to become scholars." Now I do not know if what I just showed you is actually happening in any of our libraries. You might have been saying, "I had to suspend disbelief," while you were watching that, but it is clearly important to them, and I think there is something of great value in it.

In this talk this morning, I want to basically cover three things: the first is a little bit about what is going on in the world with respect to engineered serendipity. Can you design into systems this actual serendipity so it takes place? We would generally say there is a good thing when that happens. The next thing would be some of the challenges that we face in making that happen, and some of them are things that we might have control over and some of them are things we do not have any control over. The third thing I will

talk about before I wrap up is just a couple of ideas about things we want to try to do to design collisions with collections into our libraries, and then we will have a few minutes, and I think if you have some ideas or you are doing some interesting things in your libraries in this area, perhaps we will have an opportunity to share that.

Let us start by going back to 1754. All right. What happened? A British aristocrat named Horace Walpole writes a letter to his fellow British aristocrats in which he contemplates the mysteries of good accidental discoveries. He finds this very fascinating and he wonders, “How do we make this happen? Why does it happen? How does it happen?” In a letter he writes about a Persian fairytale. It is called *The Three Princes of Serendip*, and in this fairytale, there are these three princes that travel the world, and they are always having these amazing, fantastic, accidental discoveries. So it is Horace Walpole in 1754 that actually coins the term “serendipity.” Fast forward to the twentieth century—you have MIT social scientists who are doing experiments to see if they can engineer serendipity into the workplace or into the laboratory, and they are doing all kinds of studies. Some of them might be what is the difference when you have four people sitting at a lunch table versus 12 people sitting at a lunch table? What is the difference between having people 6 feet apart from each other working as opposed to having people 20 feet apart from each other working? In all of these experiments, they keep coming back to one conclusion, and that is the more you can do to bring people and things into closer proximity with each other, you are more likely to have better productivity, a greater ideation, and good things keep coming out of those interactions, those collisions between people and things.

Now fast forward again to the twenty-first century. Nathan Eagle is a researcher at the MIT Media Labs, and he decides to do a digital age experiment which is basically the same thing. Can you engineer serendipity into the lives of people? So what he does is he gets 100 cell phones and he programs them so that when they come within 5 feet of each other they emit a signal that is unmistakable so that you would obviously go over

and say, “Hey, your cell phone is making the same signal my cell phone is,” and he gives them away to 100 random people in the MIT community. The people have no idea that they have one of these phones. This experiment again confirmed that with the people who came in contact with each other and have that serendipitous collision, they ended up learning more about each other, they decided to, in some cases, work on projects together; so he discovered, again, that there is good outcome when you try to bring people together in a serendipitous way.

Now, you see some of that engineered serendipity happening in different workplaces. There is a famous story about Steve Jobs, and it is kind of questionable whether it is true or not, but when he built the Pixar Studios, he was very intentional about wanting all of the people in the different departments, you know the coders and the designers and animators, he wanted them to come together. So he built this room where he thought everybody would come together, and they would have these really great interactions, and a lot of great creativity and ideation would come out of it, but people were not going to the room. So he asks the designers of the building if they could move the bathrooms just to right outside of that room so if you wanted to go to the bathroom you had to go to right outside that room. Now, there are varying stories about whether that actually happened or not, you know that is Steve Jobs, but that was behind his thinking of trying to engineer serendipity into the workplace. If you look more recently at what happened at Yahoo when Marissa Mayer became the CEO, she did something very controversial when she banned telecommuting because her vision for improving the company, which had been very static, was to create this idea of one Yahoo where all of the people in the company would be in the same place working together. She was very intentional about wanting them to collide and connect with each other, and have these collisions that the research has shown again and again can make a workplace more productive and make people more creative.

I also had a chance to visit in New York City a place called General Assembly. General Assembly

is a start-up incubator in New York City. No, this is not the United Nations's General Assembly; maybe that is where they got the name. The General Assembly is a start-up incubator, and here is what is interesting about it: there are dozens and dozens of start-up companies working there and there are no offices. Everybody is in this enormous room and each company is at a bench. It does not matter if you are the CEO, or the coder, or the marketer, or the salesperson, you all work together. And what is really amazing is that you have a company that is working on online gambling over here, and a company that is working on online employment services over here, and everybody is kind of coming into contact with each other, and all of these serendipitous accidents or good accidents are happening and people are learning from each other. One of the things they are primarily learning is how to become a good start-up company which means getting funding. That is always the hallmark of success. So those are just a couple of things that are happening in an increasing environment where people are trying to engineer serendipity into our lives.

The challenge, I think, in libraries is that we are doing the exact opposite, and we are creating environments that might be engineering serendipity out of the library experience. I showed you that first video, and I wanted to sort of do a reality check, so I asked students this question. And let us see what they had to say (see video). So that video was shot right outside our library, and it can be a little bit disheartening and dismaying when we hear so many students saying that they never go to the library and never find the books. I think that is just part of the challenge we face in a digital age, and I think that the faculty, who have these great aspirations like we do for students who come to our libraries and make these great discoveries, is that we may not be realistic about twenty-first-century college student research behavior. But we did hear that a few students did have some collisions with the collections in which they found something that was really interesting to them. Even Jack Sparrow, who I did not realize was one of our students, he found Walt Whitman. He became a Walt Whitman fan.

What can we do to try to make those things happen? And what is happening that prevents it from happening? So just a couple of thoughts on that. I think some of them are technological, some of them economic, and some of them are out of our control all together. So, for example, you know we are just buying fewer books all together. Now, we still have plenty of books though. So maybe that is not the total issue, but one of the things is that we are caught in sort of a difficult position because we know that the current expectations of our user community is that they want new kinds of space. They want collaborative workspaces. They want private study rooms. They want all kinds of interesting things, and most of us cannot build new buildings. We have to sacrifice existing spaces if we want to make some of these things happen that meet the new user expectations, and then we see things like this in the paper which is very recent. This is University of Nebraska at Lincoln (referring to slide), and they are wanting to do that exact thing. You know, they say in this article that over the past 10 years or so that their circulation statistics have plummeted from 400,000 something a year down to 100,000. They have done all their research, and they feel very comfortable that they can take all these books off of the first floor, put them in storage or replace them with digital storage, and still satisfy the needs of the community. You see the typical responses to that here where students say, "Oh, I love the books being here in the library," even if they may not use them and, of course, there is the faculty quote that says, "Oh, I come to the library for the one book that I need and I leave with four other books that get me excited about some new area of research that I did not even think about previously." So this is something that we feel like we need to do, but, again, as we do that are we engineering the possibilities for collisions with collections out of our libraries?

Then we have situations like we need to put books in remote storage, and I think more libraries, as they build ASR systems and the robotic systems, there is less likelihood that there may be collisions with collections. I went to the Hunt Library back in July, and it is a beautiful library, and it is a total "wow!" experience, but what they did is really

interesting. What is sort of ironic to me is that they built this book bot in a way that there is this huge glass window so that it is almost like a tourist attraction when you come in the library. The day that I was there, I think I saw at least three groups being toured around the library, and everybody that stopped was like, "Oh, wow look at this thing; it is really amazing." It is kind of ironic because no one can actually come into contact with any of the books, and so you know that raises a real dilemma for us. We want people to have these collisions with our collections, and were putting them in the storage systems, and you know how we make that happen? I had a suggestion what I think could be happening, and now they are working on these kinds of systems at North Carolina State University.

Then you look at what is happening in higher education overall that might be having an impact. For example, we know that there has been a decline in the number of students that are humanities majors, this started back in 1970 when our humanities majors were about 14% of the student population, and it is now down to about 7% holding steady. And you might say that, yeah, those students in the humanities, possibly the social sciences, are the ones who are more likely to want to go to the library and be searching through the stacks and making these kinds of discoveries. Where higher education is headed, unfortunately, the conversation now is about, "What is college for?" Is it for the liberal arts so that we can create students who are critical thinkers and ask questions and are lifelong learners, or is it an experience where you just become prepared for a job? We know that the pressure is on our students and their parents to afford higher education; it puts a lot of pressure on them to be more focused on the job, and so students that are in fields like engineering, architecture, business, and even education, to some extent, really do question why they should go to a library and get books and make these kinds of discoveries because it does not necessarily have anything to do, from their perspective, with their career preparation. We know that even though our curriculums build general education courses into them so the students will have that exposure to the

humanities, they are resistant to the kinds of education, and so we see many students when you talk to them say, "I really do not understand why I have to learn about Shakespeare," or some other substance of that nature. So those are just a couple of things that I see are possible external threats to things that are happening in the library environment, but I think, to some extent, it is about what we do and the way we design our libraries and, to some extent, its external factors that are creating situations where it is less likely that we are going to get students who are going to be in the stacks having these great collisions with our collections. Of course, the other issue is digital collections. We are going from print to digital, and how do you have a collision with something that is not tangible? That is a technology issue, and how do we work our way around that one?

Let me share a couple of thoughts on some things that we might be doing to try to design into the library experience more collisions with collections. Now, the first one might be something that I think public libraries do very well which is creating impulse zones. The idea behind that is to put books where people do not expect to see them, and it might be a display near the front door of the library, it might be something like in this case were you put some books into the computer space. So a lot of us have Learning Commons, which, in a way, Learning Commons are really interesting in that, if you think about it, they really are designed for serendipitous discovery. You know, you are putting teaching and learning people there, you are putting tutors there, you are putting writing centers there, you have got librarians there, and our hope is that a student coming in is going to have all these different collisions with different people that can help them be more successful in their academic work. But even something as simple as this, you know I want to try to put books in places where people do not expect them, and this is a part in our library where there are some popular reading, there are some graphic novels, and these books are pretty highly circulated because everybody is walking by it; you know, they are going to the computers, the study spaces, and they stop and a check it out. Fortunately, people are discovering some interesting things there. Now, I know that you

cannot do this all over the library. You cannot have little collections in 20 or 30 different places. That drives the control factor a little bit overboard trying to keep track of where everything is.

Another idea one of our creative librarians came up with is this idea of curated stacks, which are like visual bibliographies, and the thing that is interesting about it is that it is actually students who create these exhibits. They are really simple, nothing fancy about it. You do not need a lot of money. They are really just facsimiles of specific books that that student actually discovered and became really enamored with and wanted to share with other students, and, yes, you could potentially put a couple of books out there as well if you are not worried about them being found. But someone would know where they are, I guarantee that. But that is always a challenge when someone says, you know, I am looking for this book and it is like, well, I am not sure if it is in the curated stacks or over here or over there, so you have to be careful about that. Most of it is just facsimile, and these could very easily be put in many different places around the library just, again, to get people to engage with content that they did not expect to find.

This is something that public libraries do, and I think it is a very interesting idea. I know that at least one academic library is trying this, and it is called "Blind Date With A Book." Again, it is just the idea of trying to get people to interact with some printed content. What you do is you have this display in your library, and you wrap the books up so that people don't know what the book is, and then on the cover of the book you give the people some clues, like what is the genre of this book, or maybe a hint from the plot, or something along those lines. This could be very popular as far as just engaging people and wanting to encourage them to have a collision with a book that they might not otherwise have had in the library.

Okay, so what do we do about the digital stuff? That is really challenging. I will make one suggestion, and this is something that I really hope people will look into when they get back to their libraries, which is this idea of helping our faculty create alternate textbooks. One of the

things that are nice about this is that most of the alternate textbooks that our faculty create are using content from the library. They are using articles from the databases, they are using chapters from the e-books, but many other faculty will go out and find additional materials in the world of open educational resources. We actually have a project where we try to take a couple of faculty each academic year and encourage them to ditch their textbook and start giving students access. I do not call them textbooks anymore. I call them digital learning materials. There is probably a better word for what we are trying to get people to do, and this has actually been very successful. For one thing, students love it because they do not have to buy a textbook. That is an obvious win for the students, and it is a win for the faculty because they do not feel guilty that they are making the students spend all the money. But in talking to the faculty that have done this program, one of the things they feel really good about is that they are exposing students to library resources. They are exposing them to some of our content that is in databases and e-books, so this stuff is not just sitting there. They are actually getting the students into the content and exposing them to it so that they will hopefully have the students wanting to go back and use it again and again. One of the things we have also discovered in these alternate textbook projects, and one of the challenges of giving students digital learning materials, is that they are somewhat resistant if they cannot get something in print. But the faculty that I have talked to, as more students come to campus with laptops and tablets, the students are becoming much more amenable to having digital learning material because they can read the materials much more easily on their electronic devices, although we need to be careful about accessibility issues. That is a huge issue on our campuses now. So I hope you will look into alt textbook projects. This is something that is not too difficult to do because I am always dismayed when a response to textbook challenge is just to buy the textbooks and put them on reserve, because that really does not solve the whole broken textbook publishing system. As librarians, we do have the power to guide faculty to other kinds of alternate resources, and we are not the only ones doing it. There are

many other libraries that are getting into this idea of helping faculty adopt digital learning material.

Now this is something you may have seen. This is the Digital Public Library of America, and they just released this about a week ago. This is their virtual book route, and this might be the solution to removing books from stacks and giving people the capacity to search for books that are either in remote storage systems or are just purely born digital. Over on the left side, you see there are different colors and sizes of the bands, and I believe that is something to do with the relevance of the book to your search. You absolutely can browse a collection this way, and you can see some images from the books. You can get some information. It is sort of like the comparing of a gourmet dining experience to a fast food experience. You are eating, but it is not the same. So you are browsing, but you cannot open up the books and have that tactile experience of browsing through and turning pages and seeing things. I do not know how we do that exactly. As part of the preparation for my talk today, I did do a little investigation into what is happening in the world of holographic displays. I do not think we are there yet, but maybe 10 years from now it might be very conceivable to have holographic books where people could bring them up on a screen and virtually turn pages and see what is in those books. So that might be a future iteration of a virtual browse like this.

I hope I have given you a strong message here that there is something of value in creating collisions with our collections. I know with all of the challenges that you face at your workplace, and all of the difficulties you have at your jobs, what I am talking about here today might seem trivial; but I assure you it is not trivial. It is really important to what we do in our libraries. If you

think back over history, some of the world's most important events were totally serendipitous. This country was discovered by accident. Columbus was not looking for this continent, he was looking for India. A scientist put some dirty dishes with bacteria in his lab and forgot about them. When he came back a week later he saw this really strange mold growing on the bacteria and he saw that it was eating away the bacteria. That is how penicillin was discovered. Those are some really important accidental discoveries. There are many others that are not as important. Wheaties, Coca-Cola, Post-it Notes, Slinkys: all accidental discoveries.

I want to finish with another video that I call "An Often Heard Story" (see video). That is Martha Spivak, and I think the operative word here was, "I was bored, and I went to the library, and I discovered a book about bees." Now, if you do not know Martha Spivak, she is the world renowned expert on bees. She is a MacArthur genius, and she is probably one of the most important people in the world right now because she is exploring how to stop bee colony disease which is killing all the bees. If we do not have bees, that is serious trouble for our world, and would you think for a minute that her whole life was changed and shaped because she went into a library and had a collision with something in our collection; that is pretty phenomenal. That says that we do things that make a difference in peoples' lives with our collections, and we can change the world with the things in our collections, but it is not going to happen if we do not figure out how to do a better job of designing the collisions with our collections into the library experience. I will just finish by saying that, as far as I am concerned, if we could do that, too much of that would never be enough. Thank you.