November 2006

Back Talk -- Continuity and Change

Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson

University of Hong Kong, ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Anthony (Tony) W. (2006) "Back Talk -- Continuity and Change," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 18: Iss. 5, Article 15.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5015>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Back Talk from page 94

5. We can offer little or no service from 10 PM to 8AM (High percent of school work is done long after we close our doors and we are embracing 24/7 in the information commons context.)
6. MARC cataloging is worth the cost (Only if it is the cost of copy cataloging)
7. Readers need to have smart people select materials for them (my own studies have shown that e-books selected by users always out circulate expert-selected e-books and Google seems to satisfy most people within the first two screens most of the time.)
8. Satisfying most users is recognized as good enough (Begrudgingly accepted, but this is why huge libraries are revered so much and why Google is appreciated so easily.)

9. Silence is golden in a library (Doesn't seem important to most undergraduates most of the time.)
10. Food and libraries don't mix (My librarians still feel this way but students clearly don't.)

I could go on and on, but you get the idea. And of course we are not the only ones on our campuses reflecting on all of this.

Now I realize that lots of librarians have been going down this doom and gloom trail for a long time. In my own case I still continue to take solace and encouragement from the failure of the long expected paperless office; the continued growth of publishing and bookstores; the ongoing complaints and demands for longer library hours; the number one complaint at my campus that we lack books in the reader's field even though we buy tens and tens of thousands of them annually; the emails from students expressing thanks for the help they received last Tuesday night at 8:00 from the lady with white hair; the high number of students filling our 24/7 Student Study Centre; the pleasure of key-word searching

across human generated LC subject headings and cataloging notes; continued demand for browsing in collections selected by experts; continued high ratings from students who don't mind unmercifully flaying all the other bureaucratic agencies on campus; the complaints from students when it gets too noisy or when people talk on their mobiles (cell phones); and — well I have to admit I don't hear a hue and cry from users to get rid of the food.

So, in our life of constant change there continues to be continuities as well. Let me end with a quote taken from a T-shirt I bought this summer at the **Vancouver Public Library**: "I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library." **Jorge Luis Borges**. Let's hope he is right. 🐘

I Hear the Train A Comin' from page 92

How do you see Blackboard services intersecting with institutional repositories and peer reviewed journals?

Clearly there are intriguing opportunities — although progress has been slow. There is intriguing cross over. Institutional repositories and learning object repositories share many of the same issues: metadata tagging systems that will scale, encouraging consistent deposits and updates, archiving.

On the other hand, we, the e-learning community and the scholarly community, speak different languages. At **Blackboard** we are deeply interested in research and scholarship but, day in and day out, we and our customers are focused on teaching and learning. We know that the scholars and librarians building institutional repositories are deeply committed to students. On the other hand, day in and day out they tend to put a stronger focus on research.

When these two communities converge, something totally transformative will occur in education. I think that's what **Cliff Lynch** of **CNI** is trying to point to in his recent writings and presentations.

How will the merger of Blackboard and WebCT change the way in which the academy uses Course Management Software?

The most exciting opportunity initially is for schools that form natural communities to continue and extend their collaboration, even though some may have been using the **Blackboard CMS** and others **WebCT**.

The merger also allows us as a company to bring together more of the best minds in e-learning to drive our understanding and our vision of where our products and services need to go next. 🐘

Issues in Vendor/Library ... from page 91

automobile manufacturers that you've never heard of?

That, most likely. In the early automobile business, success called for more than vision. After all, 485 companies had some measure of that. It also took access to capital, to labor, to markets, to raw materials. And, it took the very smartest people. And some luck, and some ruthlessness, and not just vision, but a vision-ary to lead the company.

Abbot-Downing was more than a hapless stagecoach-maker that stood still while the world changed. They were a big success. The company sold its goods around the country and the world. **Abbot-Downing** had enough vision to stay in business for over one hundred years. How many companies of any era have lasted as long as that?

What's the lesson in this? One is that parables leave out much of the story. Life is usually more complex. Another is that operating a successful business is not easy. You need vision, but you need more than that. Run a company for a hundred years, and still, you don't have it made. (As today, even the **Ford Motor Company** is discovering.) And a third is that if you do make the right choices, you can prosper for a long time. As **Abbot-Downing** proved.

Print books, to most of us in the business, do not seem quite ready to succumb to eBooks the way the stagecoach did to motorized transportation. The two will co-exist for a long time, as stagecoaches and railroads did. There, in fact, might be a better parallel for today's book vendor. Railroads and railroad passengers needed **Abbot-Downing's** stagecoaches. Publishers of

PHYSIOLOGY

The APS
JOURNAL LEGACY
CONTENT—OVER 100
YEARS of Historical
Scientific Research
—SAVES you 200
LINEAR FEET of
SHELF SPACE

14 Research Journals of the
**American
Physiological
Society**
www.the-aps.org

eBooks and all libraries who buy eBooks will need book vendors to help them complete the trip, since collection development will for as far out as I can see consist of buying both eBooks and print books. For a library, when will it make sense to buy one format versus the other? When to buy both? How to integrate two potential workflows into one? How to find patterns in this dual-buying activity? For a publisher, how to preserve and not cannibalize present-day profits? How to reach all potential buyers of eBooks? How to sell them most efficiently?

And for the book vendor, who stands squarely in the middle of all this today, how to build a solution as elegant and as perfect as the **Concord Coach** was for most of a century? 🐘

Back Talk — Continuity and Change

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

Recently I was preparing for a talk about changing staffing needs. I began to think about how things had changed just during my own years working in libraries. As librarians we used to live in a card culture. Younger librarians today would have no knowledge of the catalog filing parties that would sometimes be held to bribe everyone in the library to help Cataloguing catch up with their filing backlog (actually it was quite an unhealthy thing to do since it demonstrated to reference/collection development librarians like me that filing/finding rules were totally impossible to master unless you did it all the time — my faith in subject headings has not ever recovered from the experience). Then there were Kardex files to be kept up with serials receipt, claiming, and binding status information that was entered in codes known only to serials department veterans. And of course we all wrote notes on P Slips that were the same size as catalogue cards. There are a number of other things that we no longer have to do: keep track of innumerable supplements to printed indexes and abstracts, master the use of alphabetical serials lists not filed using the same rules as the cards in the catalogue, and the use of locational catalogs to find materials stored in various branch libraries and storage collections.

Memories such as these caused me to want to look at early librarian job ads to see what qualities were asked for in the 20's or 30's. Unfortunately, our older Library Journal volumes are

in remote storage and since I have zero patience I decided to go online to see what I could find. Fortunately, we have **Early English Books Online**. I still didn't really expect to find much but was very pleased to find a small book/perhaps a tract entitled *The Reformed Librarian's Keeper* by **John Durie**, published in 1650. **Mr. Durie/Dury** was not a librarian but a user of libraries and very unhappy with the one at **Oxford**. But the advice that he passed down to us is unsettlingly familiar: He said it was the job of the library-keeper to (I have numbered the component parts of what he had to say):

1. "keep the publick stock of Learning, which is in Books and Manuscripts
2. to increas it, and
3. to propose it to others in the waie which may bee most useful unto all;
4. his work then is to bee a Factor and Trader for helps to Learning, and a
5. Treasurer to keep them, and a
6. dispenser to applie them to use,
7. or to see them well used,
8. or at least not abused" (Page 80.)

So, 350 years ago we were entreated to maintain an archive of materials, to collect more, to teach people how to use them, to secure materials to aid in the learning process, to conserve them, to promote their use, and to prevent them from being damaged or abused. He went on to give instruction on cataloguing with both subject and author access and stressed the importance of selecting the best materials (although he thought poorer materials should still be acquired but housed separately).

In my own working life many activities that were once quite common have disappeared, but the basic values related to what we should do have remained quite constant. Another piece of evidence I thought you might find interesting relates to a comparison of how my own library spent its funds 50 years ago and today. In 1956-57 our total budget was only \$0.5 million Hong Kong dollars and for 2006-07 it is \$168 million (\$7.8 HK equal to \$1 US). But while the numbers of dollars have increased greatly, there is a fair amount of continuity in how we spend our resources:

Expense Category	1955-56	2006-07
Salaries	54.5%	42.7%
General Expenses	2.6%	5.9%
Library Materials and Binding	42.9%	51.4%

We do spend 10% less on salaries and about the same percent difference more on library materials, and we spend much more on general expenses including computer equipment, etc. Yet, given the differences in the information worlds of 50 years ago and today, it is amazing that things are still so similar. Have we changed so little other than buying electronic information instead of ink on paper? You might all see if you can make such historical comparisons just for the fun of it.

But will things continue to be the same or is this proof that we librarians are still holding on to a vision of the past that will soon disappear? It is times like this that we need to at least look at librarianship in the larger educational context: 1,600 years ago **Plato** stood in front of students to teach them and the same mode of instruction happens on our campuses daily.

In the 1960's when I was in graduate school we all had to think in terms of paradigm shifts, e.g., things really change when all the old answers or assumptions are no longer valid. What about the assumptions we and **John Durie** have held so dear about librarianship, are they still valid? Here are a few assumptions whose continued validity might be questioned:

1. Students learn by reading (Podcasts anyone?)
2. Students need to be taught how to find information (90% or so seem to embrace Google without lessons.)
3. Libraries will always need to collect printed books (This seems to be safe so far, but the need to collect printed journals fell in the span of a few years.)
4. Students want f2f help (We certainly do have fans but most people do without us.)

continued on page 93

ADVERTISERS' INDEX

21 AACR	7 BLACKWELL'S BOOK	31 INFORMS
51 ABC-CLIO	29 BLACKWELL PUBLISHING	35 INNOVATIVE INTERFACES, INC.
69 ABC-CLIO	95 BOOK HOUSE	63 MARY ANN LIEBERT, INC.
25 ACS	55 BRILL	77 MATTHEWS
91 ALPSP	14 BROCKHAUS/GERMAN BOOKS	96 MIDWEST LIBRARY SERVICE
85 AM. ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION	13 CAMBRIDGE SCIENTIFIC ABSTRACTS	23 OPTICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA
57 AM. INSTITUTE OF PHYSICS	39 CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS	18 PALINET
2 AM. GEOPHYSICAL UNION	12 THE CHARLESTON ADVISOR	59 PORTLAND PRESS
47 AM. PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	10 THE CHARLESTON REPORT	83 PROJECT MUSE
87 AM. PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	67 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS	27 SAGE PUBLICATIONS
89 AM. PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	75 EASTERN BOOK COMPANY	81 SPRINGER
93 AM. PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	9 EBSCO PUBLISHING	19 THIEME
61 ANNUAL REVIEWS	45 ELSEVIER FOUNDATION	3 THOMSON
49 ASBMB	11 EMERALD	43 TOTAL INFORMATION
15 ASCE	79 ENDOCRINE SOCIETY	41 WILEY
71 ASME INTERNATIONAL	73 HARRASSOWITZ	65 WILEY
5 ATG	17 IEEE	33 H. W. WILSON
16 BASCH SUBSCRIPTIONS, INC.	37 IET	53 YBP

Ad Manager: Edna Laughrey Internet: elaughey@aol.com
phone: 734-429-1029; fax: 734-429-1711