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Technology Left Behind — The View from the Other Side

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In junior high, I played the flute in the marching band. Please understand I use the term “play” loosely. While I enjoyed the camaraderie of the band and I especially liked missing school for concerts, I was, in truth, a terrible musician. Each time the band performed on stage or at a football game, I held my flute and moved my fingers, but rarely played a note. So stricken was I with stage fright and nerves, I couldn’t bring myself to actually blow into the mouthpiece.

In college at the **University of Richmond**, I found my niche. A Theatre Arts major, I focused on costume design, set construction, and properties management. I thrived on being an integral part of the theatrical process, without actually being in front of an audience. Far more comfortable wearing black clothes in the wings of the theatre than on stage in the lights, I was decidedly a behind-the-scenes person. In my college theatrical career, I had exactly one on-stage performance, as a non-speaking member of a royal court. It was horrifying. My dress was heavy, the lights were hot, and there was a sea of faces all seemingly staring at me. I was only on stage for two minutes, and every second was grueling.

Up until recently, my work as a librarian has been in much the same vein. I began my career 11 years ago as the Serials Librarian at **Mississippi State University**. At **MSU**, I learned about serials processing and the advent of electronic journals. I investigated link resolvers and journal listing services and processed materials to help my colleagues in public services assist patrons, all from my very comfortable cubicle on the ground floor of the library, far from the hustle and bustle of the reference desk and instruction rooms.

After two years at **Mississippi State**, I came to **Furman University**, eager to expand my knowledge of technical services. I served as the Electronic Resources / Serials Librarian here at Furman for eight-and-a-half years. My primary duties were to manage all aspects of our electronic resources collection development and acquisitions. I spent my days communicating with vendors, negotiating contracts, troubleshooting electronic resource issues, and administering services such as our ERM, OpenURL link resolver, and E-Journal List.

To sum up, I have a long and storied career of working behind the scenes. I am a planner by nature, and I like to be in charge of things. But public speaking is just not my thing, and the pressure that comes with having to teach faculty and students about library resources puts my stomach in knots. There is a reason for the stereotypes about technical vs. public services librarians. Some people like to work with the public, and some people don’t. I am of the latter.

I tell you all of this to help you understand exactly how out of my element I was when, in January of this year, our library underwent a major reorganization, and I transitioned into public services. I left the comfortable familiarity of technical services to join **Furman’s** newly-formed Outreach Department, and I was, in a word, terrified.

As an Outreach Librarian, my new job duties are to teach information fluency classes, conduct individual research consultations, work regular hours at the Research Assistance desk, act as liaison to several academic departments, and coordinate library sponsored events.

I will forever be grateful for the gradual introduction to teaching and research assistance that my colleagues in the Outreach Department afforded me. I spent the spring semester observing my fellow Outreach Librarians teach information fluency classes, shadowing their shifts at the Research Assistance desk, team teaching on occasion, and eventually teaching a class on my own. During my observations, I made note of the materials they covered, the activities they did in class, and their varying approaches to different subject matter. I learned the ins and outs of LibGuides, creating individual customized guides for the classes and professors with which I worked. I studied encyclopedias, reference works, and online resources as if they were textbooks, familiarizing myself with not only their content but also how each resource is organized and best used.

If I could only prepare enough, then surely, when the time came to stand up in front of a room full of students, I wouldn’t be so nervous. Right?

Wrong. So very, very wrong.

Just after Labor Day, I taught my inaugural information fluency session, the first class completely prepped and taught by me and me alone. I spent three solid days preparing, gathering materials, creating sample searches, and drafting an outline of the material to cover. The morning of the class I was a nervous wreck. On the way to the classroom, I dropped my laptop and knocked over the book truck of materials I was pushing. About 45 minutes into the class, it was clear I had lost the students. Whatever interest they had in library resources at the beginning of class was clearly gone, beaten out of them by my droning about the appropriate use of reference materials, no doubt. I stood there, facing a classroom full of vacant stares, yawns, and obvious disinterest.

As a student in the front row nodded off, I honestly had no idea what to do. With 30 minutes left in the class, I still had material to cover, but I knew what I had to say would fall on deaf ears. I forged ahead skimming over the last part of my lesson plan, and cut them loose 15 minutes before the end of class to let them start their research individually. As I left the classroom, I breathed a sigh of relief, because, if nothing else, at least it was over.

But here’s the thing: Those students? The ones I bored to tears? **They remember who I am.** Not only do they remember who I am, they seek me out. Students that couldn’t manage to hold their eyes open while I prattled on about researching the black power protest during the 1968 Olympics come asking for me by name at the Research Assistance desk.

It is a small success to be sure, but it is an achievement I wear with pride.

My eight-plus months in the Outreach Department have been, at times, frustrating, rewarding, demoralizing, fun, frightening, educational, and, more often than not, humiliating. Never before in my professional career have I felt so unsure of myself. I ask my colleagues for help and advice on a daily basis. When confronted with a particularly tough research assistance question, I cannot prevent the look of terror that inevitably crosses my face. I find myself flying by the seat of my pants. A lot. And, even with this first information fluency session under my belt, I am still just as nervous about teaching as I ever was. (I can only hope this will pass with time and experience. Or prescription medication.)

I know I am not the first librarian to make the leap from technical to public services, or vice versa. And I wish I had some words of wisdom or a pithy quote to sum up my experiences as a new public services librarian. As I have tried to explain the change in my career trajectory to extended family members and colleagues outside the library, I can see the baffled looks on their faces. To most folks, a librarian is a librarian is a librarian. Librarians are people who sit in a building full of books and spend their days reading. Having navigated a complete upheaval of my career, I find this generalization to be somewhat comforting, however inaccurate it may be. No matter what happens, I am still a librarian.

My next information fluency session is this coming week. Wish me luck. 🍀