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Blurring Lines -- A Post-Charleston Interview on the Future of the Library with Stanley Wilder, Dean of Libraries, Louisiana State University

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Blurring Lines — A Post-Charleston Interview on the Future of the Library with Stanley Wilder, Dean of Libraries, Louisiana State University

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Each year at the **Charleston Conference** I have the good fortune to meet at least one new person who broadens my perspective on the role we all play in developing, curating, sharing and protecting knowledge as a part of the library world. In this column, **Blurring Lines**, I focus on people, companies and institutions that I feel are doing unexpected things that are instructive as to where we are heading. Over an excellent dinner (of which the city of Charleston amply offers many options), **Stanley Wilder** and I discussed the future of the library with a particular emphasis on the provisioning of learning content and the symbiosis of content and services in a digital environment. I hold the view that the provisioning of digital content and services need not be managed/administered by multiple departments in the university, particularly as concerns learning content and learning management systems, and that the library as a “digital nerve center” ought to be the home. In the following interview with **Stanley** this theme is explored, among others, and I challenge the reader to discern the degree to which **Stanley** and I concur about the role of the library.

Tell me about your last three positions, in brief, and how you feel they prepared you for your current role.

I worked at **Louisiana State University** for ten years in the 90s in administrative roles. That experience taught me more than I can convey, particularly as I’m back at the same library now. So much of the staff and the university culture are familiar to me. But my biggest takeaway is how outrageously broad and deep that experience was, given my age and lack of experience. **LSU** had of necessity to rely heavily on young people, which made it an amazing experience for me and many of my colleagues.

I then spent ten years at the **University of Rochester**, a private institution that proved to be a daily revelation in comparison and contrast. I was surrounded by brilliant colleagues at the **UR**, and they helped shape my core beliefs about research librarianship.

I left the **UR** to be the University Librarian at **UNC Charlotte**, an already-great research library (the institution dating to 1946) with a strong culture of innovation. **Charlotte** and its staff taught me more about how to be a library director than I ever gave back.

What is the meaning and role of physical space in the library?

We start out with the proposition that the library is the only physical space on campus that is academically-oriented but non-classroom space. Even the computer labs are fading away quickly at this point.

But our special sauce is the synergy: library spaces combine well-appointed academic spaces, collections, technologies, and expert staff available on an ad-hoc basis. Add the long hours, security, and coffee, and, well, nobody else does all that.

Will the library be the digital nerve center of the university?

I make a distinction between enterprise-wide computing infrastructure, and content. I don’t think the library has much to offer in terms of basic computing and network infrastructure, but we have a ton of history and expertise in managing content, from classwork to the creation and publishing of new scholarship, to access and preservation. I know I’m biased, but I really believe that important academic values are likely to suffer if the library isn’t involved.

So who’s the nerve center? I’m not sure it’s helpful to think in those terms. There’s more challenge in both spheres than any group can manage.

Can the provisioning of digital course content and the learning management system ever be under the purview of one person/department?

I don’t think there’s any organizational reason why this can’t work routinely. It’s already working well in some institutions, **Columbia University** coming immediately to mind.

And then there are lots of obvious advantages to co-locating these functions in the same organizational unit, or to establishing excellent collaboration between two units. I’m mostly concerned with building consensus on the strategic importance of combined efforts. Speaking only from the library side, I know that we have not done enough on that score.

Should the “one person/department” be the library?

I think this interview is revealing my inner library partisan! Sure, one department should be the library. I say that libraries do two things: they build collections and they provide access and pedagogies for collection use. The collection function is essentially a quality filter for the content that drives teaching and research, which connects naturally to the teaching and access systems that support their use. You may be right that digital is digital, but it makes more sense to me to say that content is content. The skills and values needed to do these functions feel cohesive, format agnostic and fundamentally academic to me.

What is the relationship at LSU between the IT department and the Library?

We have a terrific relationship, with shared space and shared library-like functions, for example, ILS management and licensing. This has been critical at **LSU**, where the library does not have a history of IT-oriented staffing.

I’m working hard to change this last bit, hiring programmers and so on. Here in 2014, we’re behind. Let’s check back and see where we are in a few years.

Should the IT department and the library be centrally managed?

I noted above the infrastructure/content distinction, where the concerns and skill sets are different enough to make me think that these functions are best housed in different units. Ten years ago there was a spurt of research institutions that attempted to combine the two, and to my knowledge, only one such arrangement remains. Not to say that it couldn’t work, only that it hasn’t yet on any scale.

How do you see data and human knowledge combining in the creation of library content and service delivery?

New technologies make it possible for research libraries to do their historic role in ways that make them more effective than ever before. In many ways, what’s required here is just tweaked technologies, and tweaked staff expertise. I don’t deny that new and different are also required, but my point is that the library is very well situated to do the future here. Really, the potential here is unlimited. I seriously can’t imagine a better time to be a research librarian.

Library as publisher? Library as textbook licensor? What do you think?

Library as publisher, that’s easy — insofar as the Internet has lowered the publishing bar to the level of tweets. Tweets and Open Access. So yes, libraries are already publishers, and this role can only grow.

The issue of textbook licensing speaks to my current number one passion. For decades, it’s been axiomatic that there is no library-based solution to the college textbook problem. That was true in the print world, but recent developments in the digital realm have changed the game entirely. This isn’t a turf battle with bookstores; something far more interesting is developing there. But there is huge opportunity for involvement with academic units on campus, or with the University at the level of academic affairs. The opportunity is compelling, but there are threats as well. Without assertive partnership from the library, costs and traditional academic values such as privacy could make the old textbook problem much worse. 🌱

