Against the Grain

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At Brunning: People & Technology--At the Only Edge that Means Anything/How we Understand What We Do

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@Brunning: People & Technology

At the Only Edge that Means Anything / How We Understand What We Do

by **Dennis Brunning** (Director, The Design School Library, Arizona State University) <dennis.brunning@gmail.com>

Annals of Organizational Advice — *The Moment You Can't Ignore: Why Big Trouble Leads to a Great Future*

(NY: Public Affairs, 2014)

Right at the beginning, authors **Dornfeld** and **O'Connor** give us a blow-by-blow account of an operating room accident or battle — it all depends on what you know. A celebrated and senior GE surgeon is closing up a patient after a 7-hour emergency resection of a perforated colon. This is a life and death moment and it's a day at the office most of us don't experience. As the scrub technician does inventory, he counts fewer surgical sponges out than went in. He challenges the surgeon who proceeds with the stapling procedure — closing up. It's everyone's responsibility to heal the patient but it's the scrub's job to count instruments and everything that goes into or out of the patient. The scrub told the surgeon a sponge was missing.

The next thing anyone remembers is a sailing surgical stapler. An OR out of control.

The authors are consultants and ethnographers. And fairly courageous to step into the big trouble of a dysfunctional surgery unit at a major hospital. The situation, the environment, the players — are all high stakes, high risk, high stress, high talent and skills.

Barry Dornfeld and **Mel O'Connor** work for **CFAR** — the **Center for Applied Research** — a research company that started up at the Wharton School of Finance at the **University of Pennsylvania**. The school known more for its finance MBAs (Republican presidential candidate, **Donald Trump**, is a graduate), it startles to read about **CFAR's** approach to organizational guidance. **Dornfeld** filmed a documentary on **Kinnear** musicians in Philadelphia. **O' Connor** is a folklorist. How did they wander into a hospital drama or any other corporate/organizational setting they describe in their book?

I urge readers to take a spin through it. The book is easy to read, doesn't distract with charts, lists, bullet points that slog through this genre — the consultant self-help book. **Dornfeld** and **O'Connor** approach organizational communication and dynamics in a way that may reawaken the social scientist in many of us, long somnambulant in our Ranganathian incarnation as library "scientists."

Dornfeld and **O'Connor** urge their clients to understand an unignorable moment as a cultural issue. This moment is easy to understand because you feel it. Think of it as the organizational "aha" moment of falling in or out of love. Or to realize you've got to go to the dentist or take the car keys from an elderly parent. You just know things are going right or wrong and whatever follows must align with this realization.

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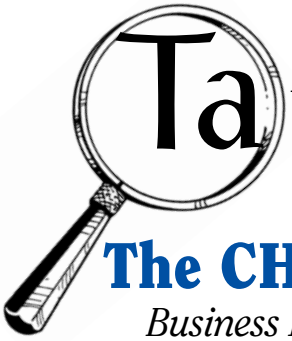

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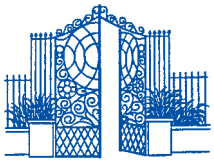

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They give substance to the understanding that culture eats technology for lunch, meaning, it's risky and counter-productive to search for and rely on technology or "more money" to solve what are essentially "people problems."

To find out how these **CFAR** consultants help a hospital overcome a potentially lethal people problem, read the book. You'll learn about an ethnographer's approach to learning about an organization from within; its way of making things work. You'll get great insights and tips — through real cases — on how to work with skeptical employees as a major source of information and ways of galvanizing an organization into a superconducting phenomenon that values command and collaboration over command and control. You also gain insight in knowing how culture can identify what's driving conflict and how conflict can lead to a great future.

And you'll find out how to get unstuck. This is a simple yet brilliant observation that organizations get stuck on issues that the culture can't immediately "compute." It's habit, denial, stubbornness — all those earthly behaviors that define life. Every thinking person in an organization knows about being stuck. The authors acknowledge and show how companies and their cultures get hung up but also how we can move on and beyond.

Four simple questions help us move forward:

1. What is the identity of our organization?
2. Who is in charge?
3. How do I lead?
4. What is our future?

To their credit, the authors present blow by blow case studies of asking these questions in troubled companies. At first read, one might ask — this is too simple, too direct, too easy. But read those questions again, think of how your library isn't changing or even inching ahead and these questions are telling and not easy. Just asking is an effort but a good effort.

Of the four, the last, the future is tough. It's hard to imagine the future but that is where our hearts and minds point. More easily we can say who we are and we can point out the person who signs our paycheck. Much harder — to identify leadership, what that entails and how it relates to organizational behavior.

But the future…this is where our imagination takes us and where success, failure, well-being, happiness, and unhappiness will take place. We know we need to get better, grow, prosper but we understand it in "what if" statements. But we need to understand the future that is present in our culture.

I got this book to better understand **CFAR's** role in helping **Arizona State University Libraries** into unison as we renovate an old building and along the way bring our large and talented staff into a new model of doing "library." *The Moment* is an easy guide and handbook to achieve our goal. You probably face the same challenges one way or another and, whether you use **CFAR** or not, you can't lose by learning cultural basics from some talented students of human behavior.

Edgeamundo — Checking the Edges

Let's take chance…fly to Miami… shake that thing…Perfectamundo! — **Billy Gibbons** and the **BFGs**

What's your edge strategy?

Billy Gibbons (half of **ZZ Top**) at age 66 takes us several tracks up and out from the **ZZ Top** groove to give us ***Perfectamundo***, Cubano "Hip Hop," Tex-Mex infused blues rock that sounds easily that he's channeling the best of South of Austin soul. ***Perfectamundo*** is **Billy Gibbon's** edge.

The edge is the outer rim that defines what you do and separates it from what you don't do. It's your organization's frontier, your border. It's where the risks and challenges facing you sit, waiting.

Ecologists coined the term "edge effect" in the 1930s to help explain why quail, grouse, and other game birds preferred transitional agricultural landscapes. They ignored more homogenous habitats like fields and forests. The greater the diversity of habitat, the greater richness of food.

These habits got the name "ecotones" or the area or zone of transition between differing habitats. Soon after economists and other social scientists saw parallels between natural ecotones and social ones — think of the great trade routes or the rich diversity of ports of call. Here ideas gathered, exchanged, tested.

In business three types of ecotones dominate. First, there is the territory where you and your customers come together. This is where the money, the whole reason you run a business and customers seek you out.

A second territory is in time. When your company interacts with its customers. Everything comes together at the point of sale or service.

The third ecotome defines all your tangible and intangible assets. It's what most have called core but it is also an inventory of all that goes on, is achieved, is lost doing business.

Current times challenge us and our businesses to discover or re-discover what we do and how we can continue to succeed. Libraries struggle with flat budgets, disruptive technologies, and users who don't understand what we do, how we do it, or even why we do it.

The usual reaction is to focus on our core and believe all will fall in place if we just center ourselves in what we do best. But what if our best isn't what the world wants or believes is best?

We need to find opportunities in what is really going on. What do our different types of users want and need, what could or should be our solutions to what they need, are there values others would seek in our assets?

Maybe we should recast our relationship with users in a way that "maps" better to the user's ultimate objective. Increasingly we are realizing that students require a quality education at the lowest cost and in the shortest time. It's the journey they are on and we are part of that journey.

If we continue to focus on core — delivering books and journals — in just exactly the way it's always been done, we are ignoring what's going on. While we argue and clamor for open access students are scanning our content and lots of other content — and putting those files on Facebook pages or dropping them into a cloud box. Students are sharing answers and lists on social media. This is edgy and edge stuff.

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The Business of Academic ...
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become much more attentive to their users than to their book collections? And that those books would, as often as not, be seen as a problem as much as an asset?

Approval plans are all about buying books on the chance they might be used. They continue to make sense for libraries with the mission, and corresponding budget, to build research collections. Fewer and fewer libraries, however, can claim that mission, or count on that budget. Instead, the same profiles that fueled approval plans are now the engines beneath the hood for Demand-Driven Acquisition (DDA) programs, generating MARC files under subject and other parameters that can provide patron access to more books than approval plans ever did. Or, many of these same profiles have been retooled for approval plans where no books are bought until a librarian has first reviewed and authorized them online on their vendor's interface, almost like a firm order. How many new books — and which ones, and under what conditions — will academic libraries buy without good evidence their patrons will discover and then open them? Those are the questions faced today by everyone in the business of academic books.

This issue of ***Against the Grain*** isn't about approval plans. Approval plans, for the past thirty years or so, have simply been my own usual vantage point on the academic book business. In fact the five contributors to this issue, from their own vantage points — three librarians, a publisher, and a consultant — barely mention approval plans. Just a few years ago that wouldn't have been the case. It's a telling sign — as if we needed another — that the business of publishing, aggregating, selling, and buying academic books is going through tectonic change, but at electronic speed.

Among the ways I've been fortunate in my career is that I began it by working for about fifteen years as a book vendor colleague of **Rick Lugg**. Now I'm fortunate once more that **Rick** agreed to write for this issue, since he and his wife **Ruth Fischer** have been as responsible as any individuals I can think of for a healthy portion of that change. When they founded **Sustainable Collection Services** in 2011, their earlier experience as library workflow consultants had revealed to them that academic libraries held too many print books that rarely circulated, or didn't circulate at all. They built their new business on that insight, and in his ***Against the Grain*** contribution, **Rick** first provides a recap of how the academic bookselling business has evolved since the 1980s, and then presents data on book circulation that can't be ignored. **SCS**, now a part of **OCLC**, is an example, as **Rick** puts it, of "what the next generation of vendor intermediary might look like," companies who bring analytics to bear on the books and other resources that publishers produce and that libraries buy.

But today's libraries don't simply "buy resources." Librarians realize that another factor that can't be ignored in the market is the purchasing power they have. When academic librarians speak up, publishers, vendors, and aggregators are wise to listen. **Stephanie Church**, of **Case Western Reserve University**, is a librarian with a lot to say. What she says is that assessment is "no longer a buzzword" for academic libraries. A library's importance to a university is no longer assumed. Libraries must prove it, and usage data is one of the ways to "strengthen the story." **Stephanie** also has things to say about print and eBook preferences; DDA, eBook pricing models, DRM policies, and user authentication hurdles; and other questions too. Readers will be thankful that **Stephanie** has chosen to speak up in this issue of ***Against the Grain***.

What if DDA went away? While the model has become widespread among academic libraries, one major aggregator has questioned the logic behind DDA.[1] Publishers have recently pulled back or have changed their terms. **Wake Forest University's** library provides "an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord" of books through a large DDA program. **WFU's Carol Cramer** conducts a "thought experiment" in this issue, to find that even with less generous pricing and terms for DDA and Short-Term Loan, "DDA remains by far the most efficient models for an institution like ours." What would **Carol** do if the DDA model was in fact suppressed? To find out, just read her ***Against the Grain*** contribution.

Librarians aren't the only ones who need to justify how their budgets are spent. Scholarly publishers, according to **Routledge's Alan Jarvis**, "have to rethink their approach to deciding whether individual book projects are worth pursuing." In his wide-ranging ***Against the Grain*** contribution, **Alan** rethinks just about every aspect of academic book publishing: total output, consolidation, the long tail, pricing, publishing models, eBook business models, open access, non-library markets, discovery, DRM, analytics, and more. Read it and you will feel like you've taken a short course in today's academic book publishing business.

If **Mark Sandler** had been a baseball player and not a librarian, right about now his number would be retired, a monument erected in the outfield, he'd be shaking hands in a home plate ceremony, and soon, would be on his way to Cooperstown. Instead, **Mark** is retiring as Director, Center for Library Initiatives, at the **Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC)**, a position he held for some ten years, apprenticed with for twenty years working in Collections at the **University of Michigan**. Among **Mark's** grand slams were his roles in **Google's** digitization projects, in the Text Creation Partnership, in shared print, in government documents digitization. I could go on, but best to stop and simply say that anyone who has ever heard **Mark** speak, or read something he's written, knows that they are in for some laughs that won't diminish the thoughtfulness of his contribution. What **Mark** is thinking about in this issue of ***Against the Grain*** is the future of the book itself in academic life. On that topic, let's just say that **Mark** isn't sanguine. He says a lot more than that, as well, and all of us with our hand in that book culture as it exists today would best pay attention.

All of us in the business of academic bookselling might prefer that things were different — the book unthreatened, library collections revered and not questioned, usage one of those "nice to haves," budgets strong, approval plans soaring, eBook models settled, assessment and analytics merely words in the dictionary. Instead, whether publisher, vendor, aggregator, or librarian, we're all challenged to examine the assumptions and practices that have sustained us in the past. If we are going to engage with our future, one place we are not going to find it, I can tell you, is in the encyclopedia.

Endnotes

1. **Robert Harington**, "Interview with an Empire: Tim Collins, CEO of EBSCO Industries," March 1, 2016. *Scholarly Kitchen*, Web. March 10, 2016.

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I know. This is easy to say, flaunts legal and moral authority, and is post-modern beyond any reasonable test. We are beyond scruples here. But stuff is happening at the edges of what we do. The first edge strategy is realizing this.

Column Editor's Note: *Concepts lifted from an excellent* ***Harvard Business Review*** *monograph,* ***Alan Lewis*** *and* ***Dan McKone's Edge Stragegy: A New Mindset for Profitable Growth*** *(HBR Press, 2016).*

Rumors
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Ran into **Daryl Rayner** in Fiesole! I hadn't seen her in ages. Remember her **Rumours from Paddington** column in ***Against the Grain*** many years ago? That was when she was at **Xrefer** (now **Credo**). **Daryl** is now with **Exact Editions**. *https://www.exacteditions.com/*

Following Italy, a wonderful woman got married at **Boone Hall Plantation** in Charleston this past weekend so my-son-in-law and daughter were visiting. We had the awesome job of babysitting my grandson **17-month-old George Jacks**! What a cutie! **George's** dad (a cardio-thoracic surgeon) has taught him to love books! Who would

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