

New Alliances in Libraryland

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I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we're on and paying my respects to elders past, present, and future. Some of the work I'm talking about today was done in Australia, on the land of the Jarowair and Giabal, the Turrbal and Jagera peoples.

When I went to university in 1998 I studied Spanish, English Literature, and Linguistics. I didn't study Catalan language, sadly, but I did take a course on Catalan culture, including the novel *La plaça del Diamant* - translated as *The Time of the Doves*.

I remember encountering, as part of my course reading, a warning to Barcelona's residents from the Franco dictatorship - *No ladres, habla el idioma del imperio español*. "Don't bark like a dog, speak the language of the Spanish empire."

I haven't been able to trace that back to a primary source. Still, remembering that phrase - *No ladres, habla el idioma del imperio español* - I think about what it means to acknowledge country, and questions of ownership and empire, even in the heart of Europe.

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In his 1934 essay '[The Mission of the Librarian](#)', José Ortega y Gasset imagines the trajectory of an individual life. How, looking ahead of us, we might see paths that have been trodden by those who have gone before - and how those well-worn paths might call to us as vocations.

For Ortega y Gasset, librarianship and other endeavours become useful vehicles for individual human beings to realise their existence. Seeing those, in the past and present, whose lives have travelled similar lines to our own, we recognise fellow members of the professions - teachers, labourers, philosophers, physicists, lawyers, librarians.

He writes that "lives differ one from the other by the predominance of a type of work - for example, what the soldier does and what the scholar does. These schematic trajectories of life are the professions, careers, or beaten tracks of existence that we find already established, defined, and regulated in our society."

And one of those beaten tracks is the path of the librarian. The path might change over the generations, we might not always walk it faithfully, we might seek to change its course, but the habits of work of our predecessors, and their legacy in all its forms, shape the journey we take into the future.

You will each have a sense of what the librarian's path looks like, but for me, libraries have always been like a TV show of my childhood called Doctor Who, about a mysterious figure who takes ordinary people on journeys throughout time and space.

The Doctor's magic box is bigger on the inside and it can take you anywhere you might imagine in the realm of knowledge, information, and culture - in fact it could even take you somewhere beyond your wildest imaginings. And that sense of surprise and wonder has always lain at the heart of librarianship for me.

Because you're not teachers.
You're not preachers.
You're librarians.

For me, discovery, surprise, exploration, and the ability to do something the authorities didn't predict, lie at the heart of a user's encounter with librarianship

Even in the shelfiest library of yore, people came to visit, chose from your collections, read books and made sense of those texts for themselves.

Even when you came with a specific query in mind, the power of serendipity to present additional context, information, or inspiration, the possibility that your hand might wander to an adjacent volume and discover something else, something more, is always there.

So if librarians are following a well-worn vocational path, as Ortega y Gasset described, and if libraries & librarians vary greatly across the world, maybe you should imagine us as a convoy moving through history. There are fast libraries and slow ones, large and small, high technology or low, working with broad communities or narrowly specialised ones, but those who serve these institutions are all moving more or less in parallel towards the next adventure on the horizon.

What happens if we look left and right, at other convoys travelling along their own paths of vocation. Beyond librarianship, who is moving in parallel? Where might we find allies and fellow travellers?

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Take occupational therapists, for example. They walk their own well-trodden path, with its own obstacles and deviations, neatly captured by Matthew Molineux, Professor of Occupational Therapy at Australia's Griffith University.

In his essay 'A Labour in Vain', Matthew describes the evolution of occupational therapy in its present-day form, revealing this branch of allied health to be a profession which - like librarianship - has sometimes been misunderstood.

While librarians have pushed hard to change the public conception of their work as “shelves and shushing”, occupational therapists faced a similar challenge in a world where their job title has elicited visions of convalescent homes, rehabilitation, and basket weaving.

Resisting a mechanistic view of their role, today’s occupational therapists use occupation itself - the tasks of daily life - to help clients with all the things they want, need, or have to do. They explore creative, unconventional, and social interventions to achieve these goals. They go beyond the medical model; they think at the level of communities and populations as well as individuals. Like the librarians of today, they think not just in terms of the services they offer, but the relationships they create and sustain with the communities they serve.

Much as libraries seek to facilitate users’ own free and independent exploration of knowledge, information, and culture in all their forms, occupational therapists put themselves at the service of the patient. Matthew writes that “Occupational therapists enable people to engage in all the activities that give their life meaning, meet their personal needs, and fulfill their obligations” - not a world away from the mission of the librarian.

In Australia, the State Library of Queensland joined forces with Matthew’s occupational therapy students to find new ways of developing health services. These experiments encompassed games and playful activities as well as digital and physical resources, including a cake baked by a librarian to represent one of the most important but complicated diagrams in modern occupational therapy. Through diverse media and open-ended, unpredictable activities, we were helping trainee therapists to see themselves as explorers in a realm of information experience.

And it’s not just in occupational therapy that these connections are possible. Spotting these parallels allow us to begin building alliances between librarianship and health practitioners that go beyond merely trotting out a regional version of “Books on Prescription” or the like; ones where the mission of the librarian becomes a key part of leading new partnerships across industries and sectors.

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Once we start looking across to other professions, we find that other forms of healthcare run similarly in parallel to the work of librarianship. Sometimes they are even deeply entwined at their point of origin.

Planetree is a global standard of patient-centred care headquartered in the United States.

Its founder, Angelica Thieriot, began advocating for health bodies to focus on patient choice and experience back in the 1970s, when she was a patient in a San Francisco hospital and found herself patronised or ignored by the staff treating her.

Their processes and authority were the priority, not her experience. She began lobbying for health boards to investigate and adopt ways of prioritising and improving patient experience.

She wanted to reclaim a holistic approach to medicine which focussed on the perspective of the person being treated.

Today, Planetree is a global movement - but its founder's first step was to introduce patient information centres - libraries - within participating hospitals. This ensured that patients had access to information - not just their own files and case notes but a broader range of material that could inform and educate them about their conditions, contexts, treatments, and the potential next steps of their health journey.

If occupational therapy and librarianship can be seen to run in parallel, librarianship and patient centred care can be seen as entwined at Planetree's point of origin. Forty years after the movement was founded, that meant Australian librarianship supporting health workers at Brisbane's Metro South Health Board.

Tasked with helping medics and health practitioners to innovate and find new ways of engaging their community, we brought an open-ended, curiosity-led approach to bear. Health board staff and stakeholders took part in a role-play game which simulates the work of public librarians at the national level; they were then invited to rewrite the game so it represented the relationships, responsibilities, and interactions of their own profession. Senior staff were reminded of the challenges faced by frontline workers; frontline workers found themselves taking responsibility for strategic decisions; and patient representatives, roleplaying as senior managers, found themselves on the other side of the bureaucratic machine, forced to manage and justify enormous budgets to their community.

The exploratory and non-didactic power of librarianship helped health workers to better understand their own profession, the relationships they held with the community, and the opportunities and risks that awaited them as they began to refocus their work to prioritise patient experience.

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We should look not just to our peers in the caring professions for these kind of parallels, these opportunities to build alliances. The examples I am offering here involve using information skills to support institutional change in other sectors. In turn, we might learn from faster-moving industries than our own. Even our suppliers might have something to teach us. I worked for a time with a data media firm in the UK, which twenty years ago supplied magnetic and optical media - everything that you can save data on - to clients across the country.

Over twenty years, the business evolved from a combination of manufacturing and distribution to pure distribution, and then, in the age of cloud computing and big data backups, a consulting role where well-trained staff advise on the best solutions for enterprises and organisations of all kind to preserve and secure their data.

Driven by customer demand, the private sector must respond swiftly to changing markets in order for businesses to thrive and survive. As the digital revolution arrived, firms which made their money from VHS tapes and magnetic media have adapted to new media, new technologies, and a new marketplace where making physical goods was less important than the expertise and experience to help other people make the choices which are right for them.

Empowering customer choice resonates with the principles of patient centred care, with the empowerments of occupational therapy, and the mission of the librarian. Would that every sector could respond as swiftly as such businesses have.

And if we think of all these human endeavours and enterprises travelling into the future on Ortega y Gasset's well-trodden paths, I want to look in one more direction before my time is up.

As I was writing this talk, a colleague reminded me of a passage in Frantz Fanon's critique of colonialism, The Wretched of the Earth: "No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men. The caravan should not be stretched out, for in that case each line will hardly see those who precede it; and men who no longer recognise each other meet less and less together, and talk to each other less and less."

When we think of librarianship and the field of "international development", when we think of librarianship and decolonisation, we realise that searching for our peers and allies treading parallel paths is not just about chummily spotting potential overlap with healthcare or therapy or the private sector.

It is also about identifying and working with communities whose information needs are not well served; about recognising Indigenous ways of knowing and managing information which deserve the same support and funding as those of colonial cultures; it is about ensuring that acknowledgments of traditional ownership like the one I gave at the start of this talk are not just a lip-service preamble.

It means understanding that seeking new alliances and new partnerships will also force us to re-examine the value of neutrality which has also been a core of the librarians' mission. And it means that roles like mine, which seek to identify new opportunities, bring new ideas to fruition, and engage communities in different ways, must be occupied by people from the widest possible range of identities and backgrounds. There should be more people in such roles - and they shouldn't all look, sound, or think like me.

Seeking new allies and partnerships for Libraryland is a practical endeavour built around developing relationships with real entities, individuals, and organisations. But it is inextricable from an ongoing conversation about our mission in changing times.

That's not a conversation which should be dictated from the top down. Finding a voice and a story for each library begins with listening - to staff, to stakeholders, to all the people around us.

The conversation about libraries' mission must include other professions, other philosophies, communities we have both embraced and neglected, and our staff at all ranks from the front desk to the people gathered in this room, because as we go forth and explore the universe of knowledge, information, and culture, we must do so in the company of all.