Academic Embedded Librarianship: An Introduction

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Although embedded librarianship has received recent attention, it has not been well-defined within academic literature. This article defines academic embedded library services and identifies some key factors of successful programs with emphasis on communication and collaboration. The history of the term “embedded librarianship,” has its roots in branch libraries, and the methods librarians use to provide service to their users in person and online are discussed.

KEYWORDS branch, collaboration, embedded librarian, history, integration, liason

INTRODUCTION

The term “embedded librarianship” has been a prominent buzz word in the library profession within the past five years. It appears in journals and is interpreted at conferences, online discussions, and presentations. The topics for study and analysis can focus in any area of education as well as in areas of corporate and special librarianship but are most commonly linked with undergraduate instruction and distance education. Literature about embedded librarianship is so diverse that the definition of this term, as well as related goals and methods when embedding services and programs, can be difficult to define. This short introduction will answer some basic questions about embedded librarianship in academia. What are some characteristics of an embedded program? Is embedding only achieved through an online classroom? How did embedded librarianship first begin in academic libraries?

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DEFINITION

Many articles suggest embedded librarianship was adopted as a term because it is a similar concept to embedded journalism. An embedded journalist is placed with a military unit to observe and report on conflicts, exercises, and missions from an insider’s vantage point (see Franklin, 2005; Embed in OED, 2007). Embedding implies that “the group seeking to integrate is experiencing and observing, as near as possible, the daily life of the primary group” (Dewey, 2005, p. 6). Embedded librarian programs often locate librarians involved in the spaces of their users and colleagues, either physically or through technology, in order to become a part of their users’ culture. A librarian’s physical and metaphorical location is often what defines them as embedded.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) recently funded a study of embedded librarianship performed by David Shumaker and Mary Talley. Through interviews, they conclude embedded librarians can, but do not necessarily work, in the location of the faculties and users they serve. Librarians are often funded by those they serve. Embedded librarians actively engage in relationship-building activities, such as attending events and conferences from their users’ area of specialization, often “possess extensive knowledge of their customers’ work” (Shumaker & Talley, 2009, p. 34), and perform complex analysis as well as offer specific services on top of the common services expected from their nonembedded counterparts. Shumaker and Talley survey the services offered by embedded programs. More than 80% of those embedded librarians surveyed train users, provide ready reference, perform in-depth topical research, and work in resource development. Highly technical tasks, such as creating information architecture, using analytical software, and computer and network systems management were performed by less than 20% of the survey respondents. Shumaker and Talley also report embedded services are often found in tandem with specialized funding. This study also confirms embedded services are not new. In fact, 60% of the respondents to the survey indicated their embedded services were more than ten years old (Shumaker & Talley, 2010).

CHARACTERISTICS

Close physical proximity is not required for embedded services to exist, but close proximity provides the librarian an advantage in better understanding their users’ needs. This proximity helps users consider their librarian as an insider in their community and creates expectations for the librarian’s assistance to be available for projects, research, and assignments. In his guest column in Reference and User Services Quarterly (RUSQ), David Shumaker explains librarians are embedded “because the librarian becomes a member of the customer community rather than a service provider standing apart”
(Shumaker, 2009, p. 240). Shumaker’s focus is on gaining access to the customer community through active collaborations with faculty and administrators. Other authors define embedded librarianship with an emphasis on the importance of gaining electronic access to students through online course management tools. These include automatically generated links within classroom management systems, online discussions, and chat functions (Ramsay & Kinnie, 2006). Both definitions are common in current library literature. Academic branch libraries tend to align their services with those of special libraries found in companies or government departments and agencies.

HISTORY

Embedded academic librarians have their roots in branch libraries. Academic institutions historically held what would later become library collections throughout different faculties. Professors had small collections they bought and cared for to assist with specific seminars; these were formalized and combined into larger library collections and eventually developed into branch libraries. Branch librarians have been collaborating with faculty members to manage library resources and generally assist with research since branches and professional librarianship merged back in the late 19th century. Historically, faculty raised concerns these resources needed to be managed by individuals with a certain level of academic training and subject specialization, thus grew the need for professional librarians (Short, 2003). In other words, the first branch librarians were embedded out of circumstance and necessity.

During their early history, branch libraries were focused on collaborating with faculty regarding library resources rather than on instruction or services. “The branch librarian was primarily a bibliographer specializing in the subject of the department whose role was to purchase scholarly material for the department’s collection” (Short, 2003, p. 17). The modern academic branch library concentrates on collaborations to advance services for faculty and student education. Branch libraries, with their well-defined clientele, are often located within the same space as the faculties they serve; consequently, they are at the forefront of discussions around education and services. One example of this is the case of librarians who join physicians in their medical rounds, embedding their services in the role and function of medical treatment. According to Cimpl, librarians began this practice in the 1960s after some success of pharmacists embedding themselves into the clinical setting, but the practice was not common for librarians until the 1970s. The goals of the clinical medical librarians was to provide immediate access to relevant materials, teach those in the medical profession skills to aid in their own information gathering, and promote medical librarianship (Cimpl, 1985, p. 23). Today, similar programs have evolved to offer new technologies as librarians
access medical journals and diagnostic tools or can offer physicians instant assistance from handheld devices.

BRANCH LIBRARY INFLUENCES

Branches are responsible for specialized collections and services. This specialization often leads to close relationships with individual academic programs and integration into the faculty culture. “Faculty are a crucial constituency; to the extent that librarians assist faculty research, they demonstrate their value to the institution” (Schilt, 2007, p. 197). Branch libraries allow librarians direct access to the faculty they serve. As faculty members realize the expertise available from their library colleagues, they are often compelled to promote the library and its services to students. The most common campus branch libraries are music, science, and technology (Short, 2003, p. 17), while business, health, and law libraries are common within academic professional programs. It is in branch libraries where specialized liaison programs exist to assign faculty specifically to an individual within the branch specialty. “One of the most commonly cited advantages of the branch library is the ability to provide personalized service” (Seal, 1986, p. 193).

Branch librarians sometimes receive their funding from the library as well as their related faculty, school, or department (Danner, 2003). This can occasionally lead to a difficult position of “…serving two masters” (Short, 2003, p. 19) but can also give these librarians more freedom to develop customized services, rather than strictly conforming to central policies and practices. Centralized libraries have a huge challenge in their need to serve a larger, more diverse population. “This [branch] closeness creates a great opportunity to develop partnerships and working relationships with faculty members that might be nearly impossible for other librarians in the main library to develop” (Short, 2003, p. 19). Branch libraries are sometimes looked upon as good service models in academic libraries because of the intense relationships built with faculty members. Some administrators indicate this is an appropriate service model to build upon (H. T. Hickerson, personal communication, February 8, 2010).

Professionals and paraprofessionals work as a team within branch libraries to provide services that are now being recognized as embedded. “[T]hese new activities of librarians are a form of old wine in new bottles. The actual activity is something librarians have always done—evaluate new or existing resources for their utility in faculty research” (Schilt, 2007, p. 197)—to position themselves as allied professionals within their respective faculties, an increased respect amongst faculty colleagues, a positive environment, increased credibility, and a climate where one can develop new opportunities (see Slinger, 1991, p. 699). This can lead to increased library
staff, librarian members of faculty committees with voting privileges, library judges of academic competitions, and librarians as instructors in directed research/independent study classes (see Slinger, 1991, p. 703). Users realize “...the most important part of the library is not the material it houses, but the people responsible for building and maintaining collections and for making them accessible to users—the librarians” (Livingston, 2003, p. 29).

METHODS OF EMBEDDING

Librarians in central academic libraries find ways of being near the departments they serve through office hours, the building of long-term collaborations with faculty, librarian-in-residence programs, and library-sponsored contests. While these reach portions of our populations and build inroads with particular faculty members, methods of embedding online also have proven an effective way to reach large groups of users at their point of need. In North America, one would be hard-pressed to find a library that does not already electronically embed services into online reference chat, make use of Web 2.0 communication applications such as Twitter and blogs, and embed librarians and collaborators within online classrooms. These are all examples of the embedding process (Ramsay & Kinnie, 2006). The name embedded librarian in this context is a double entendre, as the insertion of widgets and multimedia files into HTML code when designing Web sites is usually called the embedding of the file. Librarians are adept at embedding files online instead of personally delivering classroom lessons. Some common examples of online personalized services include effective tutorials, interactive guides and links, and chat functions. Even library vendors acknowledge a desire to be accessible to students and faculty at their point of need by building ways to insert the library’s chat function into their search screens. Librarians across the continent are present in online spaces with help and information for patrons, students, and faculty.

COMMUNICATION

Socialization is a key aspect of embedded librarianship, whether it takes place online or in person. Social bonding has a transformative effect on trust, not just in social situations but also when a faculty colleague has research or classroom support needs. One librarian describes how the location of her embedded office encouraged her colleagues to drop by for coffee, and states, “Now I know some [fellow colleagues’] family histories, their children’s names, their dogs and cats; and they know some of that about me” (Bartnik, 2007, p. 5). Her success is linked not just to working next to her users or with a particular service model but also in successfully integrating into the
community through communication and socializing. When librarians hold office hours within faculty or student lounges and meeting rooms, make house calls, and attend social as well as official functions, they effectively become a part of the communities they serve. Embedded librarians focus on methods of building relationships with faculty, researchers, graduate students, and administrative staff. Any librarian can find a way to be present and socially involved with her users to learn about their needs.

Strong communication is the key to successfully embed programs, and communicating with administrators can help prevent burnout of embedded librarians. Communication skills with staff, students, faculty, researchers, and administration from the relevant faculty or department are all necessary: “Communication is a key factor in relationships...committees, contacts, reports, open days and out-of-hours activities, supplemented by e-communication, via personal e-mail, distribution lists, and Web pages...aiming to build and nurture relationships over the long term” (Hardy & Corrall, 2007, p. 88). These traditional and nontraditional methods of communication are increasingly used by embedded librarians to ensure their success.

Kesselman and Watstein describe an ideal embedded librarian as possessing certain specific attributes, including the ability to be creative and flexible, being committed to service, possessing excellent interpersonal skills, advocating for the interests of the groups they serve, and having a “capacity to thrive in both traditional as well as nontraditional settings” (2009, p. 394). These characteristics are necessary in a highly collaborative environment.

COLLABORATION

Ultimately, embedded librarianship is about collaboration. Several articles in the literature advocate programs integrating embedded services through collaboration within almost every aspect of the academic institution (Dewey, 2005; Kesselman & Watstein, 2009). “The embedded librarian, who is truly integrated into the academic, administrative, athletic, cultural, research, and learning arenas of the university, provides quality and depth to the total campus experience” (Dewey, 2005, p. 16). Librarians should be integrated on multiple levels to be most effective. Libraries should play a role in the entire campus community. Increased collaboration is important to maintaining the library’s prominence within the institution and is usually welcomed by the greater campus community. Academic institutions are becoming more community focused, and libraries look less like places to store hard-to-find materials and more like social spaces for multitasking, group work, and expert assistance.

Collaborations are advantageous to everyone involved. In his Chronicle for Higher Education online advice column on academic culture, Professor William Pannapacker (writing under the pen name of
Thomas H. Benton advocates the need for faculty to welcome collaboration more actively with librarians:

Apart from finding ways to foster collegiality, we as faculty members can work more effectively with librarians to design research projects and to develop collections that support undergraduate curriculum. We can design assignments in consultation with librarians so it becomes impossible for students to pass through college without learning how to write a research paper... accomplish any other goal that requires the critical evaluation of sources. (Benton, 2009)

Benton tells the audience he intends to bring his classes into the library for their regular lectures, and even to occupy an office within the library, rather than with his regular departmental building. Maybe this is the ultimate goal, to have our users so tied to what we do as research experts they want to embed their classrooms and research in our spaces.

CONCLUSION

Embedded librarianship is a relatively new term but an old concept in academic libraries. Specialized services have existed in academic branch libraries since their inception. Branch libraries are examples for embedding services. Today, many libraries use technology to embed services, in particular for undergraduate students, in order to serve large populations. As collaboration becomes more prominent in academia, and services change with new technologies affiliated with modern communication and scholarship, embedded librarianship will grow. Supportive faculties and library administration will ensure embedded librarians will continue their various collaborations and subject-specialized functions. Key concepts for successful programs include location, communication, services, flexibility of librarians, and collaborations among librarians and faculty, staff, researchers, and students. These concepts, combined with nontraditional socialization opportunities, encourage librarians to provide specialized programs for their subject-focused user groups.

REFERENCES


