Editorial

Alignment, Collaboration and the Social Turn: Our Agenda for the Relational Library

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Our profession is "Moving from collecting to connecting" (Kranich et al., 2020, p, 285). Academic librarians envision a "social future" (Schlak, Corrall & Bracke, 2022) as *connected connectors*, "connecting ideas, knowledge and communities" (University of Leeds Libraries, 2022a), as outward-facing players who "seize opportunities to connect at local, national and international levels" and "purposefully connect and collaborate with strategic partners" (Lancaster University, 2020). Collaboration has emerged as a key theme in academic library discourse and was set to dominate the professional agenda until the COVID19 pandemic pushed the digital shift into pole position. The pandemic gave commitment to 'digital first' a new urgency, but we must not allow our current preoccupation with digital transformation to distract us from the equally important task of developing our capacity to collaborate and embedding a collaborative relational culture in our profession.

We have been marching towards the digital library for more than three decades and our journey via online databases, electronic resources, virtual reference, networked services and shared systems has involved a lot of collaboration along the way and not just with other libraries. But our collaborative activities and social relationships have also evolved on a similar timeline, independently and in tandem with that technological trajectory; indeed, collaborations have been instrumental in securing our digital future in scholarly communications with both established and new organisations supporting our work in areas such as content licensing, open access, research data, library publishing and software development. Building tools and building relationships are both important tasks for libraries, but the latter is a prerequisite for the former, which is why we must commit to "collaboration first" (Norman, 1991). We cannot discover, define, design, develop and deliver interventions to enhance research and learning without "a deep, fundamental understanding of people and groups"; in particular, an understanding of their individual and group activities, which are "vastly different" and hence require an understanding of "the complex social and cultural aspects of their interaction" (Norman, 1991, p. 89).

Norman's (1991) call for systems designers to engage in "collaborative computing" is reflected in the collaborative and participatory service design processes that are now widely used in academic libraries, often led by user experience (UX) librarians (Bell, 2014; Marquez & Downey, 2015; Somerville & Collins, 2008). Steven Bell (2014, pp. 379, 380) goes on to suggest that "academic librarians must continue to seek out opportunities to leverage both the technology and the power of relationships to design a library experience that supports student and faculty success" and asserts that "The differentiating capacity of the future academic library … is personal relationships with academic librarians". The UX movement is one example of the "pervasive collaborative turn that has impacted many sectors of society, including higher education" (Saltmarsh, 2017, p. 3) and maybe not the first that comes to mind when we talk about collaboration and the academic library. But integrating co-design and other on-the-ground collaborative activity into everyday practice is just as urgent as lofty notions of strategic business partnerships if we really want to accomplish the cultural shift required to embed the partnership model in academic libraries in line with the shared vision emerging for our profession.

My purpose in writing an(other) editorial on the topic is to put collaboration back where it belongs at the top of our agenda, because despite impressive advances in thinking and practice that have expanded library activities and extended professional influence, there is a lot more work to do. And we need to get on with it and accelerate our progress towards the collaborative, social organisations that libraries can and must become.

Revisiting academic library alignment in the collaborative context

We all know that "libraries need to align closely with their parent institution" (Pinfield, Cox & Rutter, 2017, p. 6): "libraries cannot thrive without aligning their workings directly to the core mission of their host institutions"; they also need "new alignments with different organizations … alignments for moving into new sectors" (CLIR, 2008, pp. 2, 5; Dillon, 2008, p. 57). Institutional alignment is multifaceted: it has been defined as "the process of ensuring that there is coherence between the library's identified roles and the prevailing or emergent needs of the academy and the institutional context" (Lougee, 2009, p. 610). But libraries also need to align their workings internally and ensure that there is coherence in the way in which they operate and collaborate across functions; consistency in the way that staff relate to and engage with users at service points, in learning spaces, via electronic communications and through work flows; and cohesion between the thinking and practices reflected in their strategic visioning and the acquisition and mobilisation of resources – particularly human resources – in service operations.

To attain their desired future as trusted partners in the academy, libraries must ensure there are no critical misalignments – or gaps – between three interrelated factors: the thinking outlined in the visions of collaborative working elaborated by their leaders; the practices assumed as their mode of working by staff throughout the library; and the capacity for sustainable performance represented by the resources available, particularly the human capability to deliver the outcomes envisaged, such as partnerships with disciplinary researchers and professional services, relationships with local agencies and community groups, and international collaborations. Contemporary academic library visions present bold thinking

about future professional practice, but inspiring strategy documents and exemplary case studies do not tell the whole story. In many cases we are looking at snapshots of excellence that are far from typical of the sector as a whole or even representative of a library in its entirety. The interdependencies in our profession mean that it is in everyone's interest for the sector to make this journey together. We do not want a two-speed economy, so we need to acknowledge the collaborative imperative as a professional goal for which we have a shared responsibility for collective action. There are three key areas where progress is vital, improvement is essential and knowledge sharing will bring significant benefits: service models, competency development and intellectual frameworks.

Moving from transactional services to the relational model

Throughout the 21st century, library thought leaders and sector-based organisations have been pushing libraries and librarians towards a more collaborative relational style of working that is both more personal and more social than traditional service models. Advocates have suggested concepts such as the *hybrid, personal, embedded, blended* and *engaged* librarian and the *diffuse, recombinant, participatory, boutique* and *inside-out* library in addition to the information/knowledge/learning/research/scholarly commons. Some of these models focus selectively on developing or repositioning library staff in particular roles (typically liaison/reference librarians), others were conceived as more comprehensive service models that if implemented would represent a substantial change in service style for most or all of the library. They all reflect the evolution of higher education since the 1990s from elite remote scholarly institutions towards open inclusive learning communities employing new ways of working and styles of service that reflect a person-centred response to the challenge of dealing with large and diverse populations.

The ambitious visions promoted by academic libraries today generally depict collaborative working as the default *modus operandi f*or the whole library. Accordingly, some libraries have acknowledged that "Successful delivery of our vision requires a shift in our approach, our culture and our thinking" and also intend to incentivise cross-functional silo-breaking work, to support more staff in developing their institutional and professional network and to arrange "staff up-skilling and wide-skilling" (University of Leeds Libraries, 2022a; 2022b, p. 16). If we really want to embed collaborative, community-engaged relationship-based practice across all areas of practice (generalist, specialist, frontline, backroom, operational and administrative), we need more professional debate on the subject – including published library scholarship – to build shared understanding of what good practice looks like and gain insight into how the abilities of library staff can be developed and the whole organisation transformed to make it a reality, in order to close the gap between our collective vision of libraries as connected interactive user-centred socially-inclusive organisations and the reality of the detached reactive impersonal transactions that still characterise many user experiences of service desks, web forms and automated emails.

Practitioners who conceptualise the desired service shift as moving "from a transactional to a relational model" (Decker, Givens & Henson, 2017, p. 13; Kranich et al., 2020) are getting to the heart of the matter here: first, by helping us to focus more accurately on the core competence needed for collaboration and partnership, namely relationship management;

and secondly, by identifying what is holding us back and threatening to undermine our vision, namely the transactional mindset that manifests as "the tensions between cost-effective functional or transactional services … and more in-depth liaison relational services" (Kranich et al., 2020, p. 286). This does not mean we have to demolish all the functional structures developed over the past decade, though the balance between technical and subject specialists may need readjustment for the library to attain trusted partner status in research processes, projects and programmes; but it is a reminder that the whole library needs to buy into the partnership model, understand what it involves and how it affects staff interactions with each other and their relations with library users.

Recasting the collaboration/partnership narrative to focus on the shift from a transactional to relational style enables us to identify existing pockets of excellence in libraries that can serve as exemplars moving forward. Relational practices are probably farthest advanced among practitioners involved in teaching and learner support, whose pedagogies have become more sophisticated as their work has evolved in line with technological and sociocultural changes. Collaborating with faculty and partnering with students is only part of the picture here for librarians connecting with learners at a deeper level in a style that is both relationship-centred and values-led. Connectivist, critical, culturally-relevant and contemplative pedagogies are being adopted for classroom settings and teachable moments around service points and in creative spaces as librarians shift their styles from expert instructor and standard-setter to coach, guide, facilitator and co-learner (Duffy, Rose-Wiles & Loesch, 2021; Foster, 2018; Guder, 2010; Swanson, 2005; Watts, 2017).

Douglas and Gadsby (2022, p. 807) note that "Application of relationship and relational thinking to academic librarians' work as educators has gained traction in recent years" and advocate "Connected Teaching", as an inclusive social pedagogy that "rests on three elements: 'relationship, identity, and emotion', where relationship is the core of the educational experience". Practitioners are accordingly recognising that developing and maintaining relationships with colleagues, learners, researchers and administrators is "essential to the continued success and growth" of new and improved offerings in all areas of library work from collection building and information literacy to scholarly communication and data management (Vandegrift & Colvin, 2012, p. 389). Relational working is most prominent in liaison activities and learning support, but less evident in generic frontline services and specialised functional support, although recent scholarship shows how subject liaisons can build bridges and broker relationships between technical specialists and disciplinary researchers when they all work together on a task instead of having handoffs between liaisons and functional teams.

The relational shift marks a return to our traditional values as caring, helping, democratic professionals, who are concerned about the quality of our personal relationships and like working alongside colleagues, learners and researchers; professionals who are committed to a participatory culture and "an ethos of 'doing it together' in addition to 'doing it yourself'" (Jenkins, Ito & Boyd, 2016, p. 181). Literature on frontline services shows how a physical change such as removing or adjusting furniture can assist cultural change by replacing across-the-desk transactions with side-by-side working to provide "a more relational experience" through "an empowering, collaborative model" facilitating "relationship building through discovery and experiential learning" (Decker et al., 2017, pp. 19, 20;

Deineh, Middlemas & Morrison, 2011, p. 6). The change from a transactional to a relational model also demands reconsideration of the adoption by libraries of practices associated with technocratic professionals who are more concerned about the cost and volume of transactions and less interested in the unique or specific needs of individuals, preferring self-serve over personal assistance and imposing self-help on everyone, regardless of their situation.

Developing relationship management as a threshold competence

We need to grow library capacity for relational working in order to advance. Library literature identifies communication, networking, sharing and social skills as key abilities for collaborative work and also challenges assumptions about the presence of these skillsets in academic libraries (Atkinson, 2019; Davies, 2011). Such concerns are repeated in reports from RLUK, ARL and SCONUL, underlining the need to develop the profession's capacity for building, developing and managing relationships, including "Skills to build strong relationships with researchers and other campus professionals, and to establish collaborative partnerships externally, and to manage client relationships" (Auckland, 2012, p. 36). Jaguszewski and Williams (2013, pp. 6, 14) describe "capacity to cultivate trusted relationships with faculty and others" as an "emerging or new baseline workforce requirement". Pinfield, Cox and Rutter (2017, p. 43, 46) reiterate the critical importance of "'softer' skills, such as … relationship management and negotiation" and suggest academic libraries can build on their "strong consortial and partnership networks'', but "Multi-professional collaborations within the library and partnerships beyond" will be crucial.

Pinfield et al. (2017, p. 30) echo Davies's (2011, p. 265) doubts about the sector's "capacity, propensity and appetite to share", noting mixed messages about competence and interest in inter-professional collaboration and a "danger that the library profession is too insular, with insufficient collaboration with other professional groups". They flag significant resistance to change in a profession that can be disappointingly conservative when presented with new ideas or images that upset and challenge their ingrained assumptions about how the world works. I have argued before (Corrall, 2016, slide 22; 2020, p. 195) that relationship building is an area where enhanced capabilities are both important and urgent for academic librarianship and our whole profession:

> "The participatory culture of the digital network world requires practitioners who are socially engaged, participating in the activities of their communities and delivering expertise/support embedded (physically or virtually) in the workflows and lifeflows of their users, which in turn requires both technical/functional and behavioural competencies – including expertise in learning facilitation and technology translation, user-centred design and assessment methods, and abilities in communication and interaction, collaboration and relationship management".

Regrettably professional associations have given scant attention to collaborative working, relationship development and partnership management in documenting our professional knowledge and skills base. Relevant abilities tend to be scattered under various headings and the brief descriptions for generic abilities contrast with more coherent elaboration of

specialist professional expertise (ALA, 2009; CILIP, 2021). ALA's (2021) draft revision of the *Core Competences* (in progress since 2017) includes more points of relevance, but omits previously included "concepts behind" and "methods for" developing "partnerships, collaborations, networks, and other structures with all stakeholders". In contrast, the *Competencies for Librarians in Canadian Research Libraries* (CARL, 2020) get closer to what is required to support personal, professional and organisational development, devoting a whole section to Collaboration. Also "Competency" here covers "a grouping of knowledge, skills and mindsets that define and contribute to success in the field", moving us beyond the the ubiquitous but unhelpful labelling of collaborative abilities as "soft skills".

Such language downplays the staff development task and ignores the contextual understanding, institutional knowledge and strategic motivation required to support the personal, social and technical skills enabling successful connections, continuous interactions, trusting relationships, durable networks and lasting partnerships. I suggested earlier that relationship building should have the status of a "threshold" (or "gateway") competency to make it clear that relationship know-how, know-what and know-why is a "baseline workforce requirement" (Jaguszewski and Williams (2013, p. 14) for the 21st century academic library, thus constituting an entry-level set of knowledge, skills and attributes needed for all library workers to relate to colleagues, users, suppliers and others in order to perform their assigned roles in the library. Yes, this is a *workforce* requirement for *all*, not just a requirement for professional and technical specialists and managers, and it is even more important now than seven years ago. So, we need to develop competency frameworks to accommodate the different categories of people employed in libraries and also to stop simply equating relationship management with "soft skills".

Using social capital concepts to reframe our collaborations

As the focus of their day-to-day work has shifted "from collecting to connecting" (Kranich et al. (2020, p. 285), librarians have identified an assortment of analogies, metaphors, models, frameworks and guidelines to conceptualise their collaborations, evaluate their relationships and elevate their connections from brief encounters to long-term partnerships. They have adopted or adapted concepts and tools from business and economics, sociology and politics, education and psychology to get a grip on the proliferation of interactions that characterise everyday library life. They have used multipoint versions of the "collaboration continuum" to facilitate library co-operation, teaching collaborations and service convergence (Kaufman, 2012; Pham & Tanner, 2014; Waibel & Erway, 2009). They have promoted concepts such as "deep", "radical" and "disciplined" collaboration to signal the step-change in library thinking and practice (Gashurov & Kendrick, 2013; Horton, 2013; McGovern, 2018; Neal, 2010). *NRAL* has supplied original conceptualisations of faculty-librarian curriculum collaborations, shared services and students-as-partners, as well as reviewing proven models for relationship development, including process consultation and embedded librarianship (Davies, 2011; Delaney & Bates, 2015; Eldridge et al., 2016; Machin, Harding & Derbyshire, 2009; Salisbury, Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2020).

Practitioners have continued to search for concepts and theories that will provide tools and clues to analyse, interpret and assess collaborative relationships among communities, institutions, groups and individuals in the dynamic and complex environment of academic libraries. Dallas Long (2019) turned to a multi-factor framework developed for higher education to make sense of library relationships with student services, which revealed the significance of external pressures, campus networks and professional values in intra-organisational collaborations in the sector. Jo Ann Murphy (2017) broke new ground by using the proximity concept (found in literature on inter-organisational collaboration, innovation networks, economic development and social capital) to identify seven key dimensions of collaboration between libraries and learning services.

Another emergent body of work builds on prior strands of library scholarship on intellectual/service capital (Corrall, 2014), relational capital/social network analysis (Bracke, 2016) and social capital/change leadership (Schlak, 2015) and is blending these perspectives to offer new intellectual frameworks for thinking about relational practices in libraries through a social lens (Schlak et al., 2022).

Social capital is a complex concept with multidisciplinary origins and competing definitions, but its complexity gives it great versatility and flexibility as an analytical, developmental and evaluative framework, evidenced by its adoption in diverse professional settings, including business, community work, education, health care, politics, social services and libraries. Social capital is essentially about relationships and resources, specifically how personal and social relationships of individuals and groups generate and facilitate access to resources. The concept is multifaceted and leading theorists concentrate on different dimensions, but subscribe to the same general thesis that relationships have the potential to provide resources that can be mobilised for social action. The research captured in our recent book (Schlak et al., 2022) demonstrates how different social capital perspectives applied as a single or multifocal lens can produce a much richer picture of collaborative working than the continuum models and matrix frameworks more often used by academic librarians.

The three key conceptions featured in our introductory surveys and real-world cases all speak directly to trending topics and current concerns in academic libraries. Bourdieu's cognitive/symbolic perspective aligns with the critical stances librarians are taking on issues such as social equity and racial justice; librarians have used his concept of cultural capital to explore how the interactions of first-generation students with teaching faculty and librarians can facilitate information and academic literacies. The structural/network theories of Ronald Burt, Mark Granovetter and Nan Lin have helped us to understand the value added by library directors and subject liaisons to the work of functional specialists in research data management through their brokering activities with research administrators and bridging ties with disciplinary scholars. Practitioners have used social network concepts to analyse the intensity, multiplexity and reciprocity of student relationships with peers, staff and others in creative learning spaces. Another chapter integrates philanthropy research with Robert Putnam's normative relational theory of "bridging" and "bonding" capital to show how using a Social Capital Fundraising Model can transform a bridging connection into a bonding relationship and convert an interest in giving into a real passion for the library.

Other contributors to our project applied social capital theories to collection development, subject librarianship, staff turnover, student success and service design; our work also references applications of social capital theory to academic labour, career development, civic engagement, community building, digital repositories, faculty recruitment, innovation networks, liaison librarianship, library leadership, resource sharing, scientific collaborations, service learning and social media. Social capital in its variant forms offers a diversity of perspective on collaborative working through a readymade framework of pertinent concepts and shared vocabulary enabling a granular understanding of personal and community relationships. It has proved particularly valuable in understanding the nuances and complexities of cross-boundary teamwork, the challenges and rewards of investing in relationships with those who are not your natural partners, and the different forms and bases of trust and trustworthiness. We have seen a huge surge in capital-based studies in higher education over the past decade and a proliferation of multi-capital frameworks to advance practice related to minority students, graduate employability and social mobility. We believe social capital provides the key to success with the library-as-partner model and we invite colleagues to join us in our scholarly journey towards relational librarianship.

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