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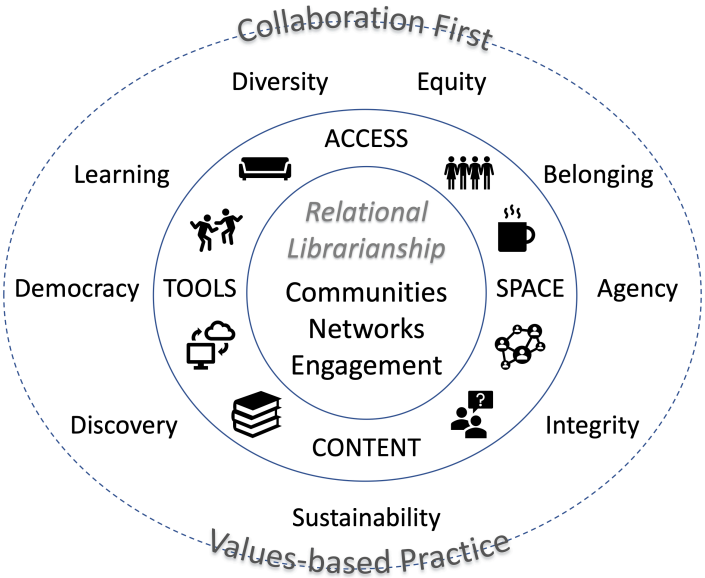
Making Sense of the Social Turn in Academic Libraries

A new model of *socially-engaged practice* has emerged in higher education. Librarians are joining their professional peers in *working differently together* to improve access to resources through *networks of relationships*. Sheila Corrall explains the origins and key features of the relational library model that is taking hold across the globe.

The social complexion of higher education has changed radically since the 1990s reflecting trends in our communities, professions and economy. Business and public engagement, widening access and participation, lifelong and lifewide learning, open access to research, crowdsourcing and citizen science, makerspaces and innovation collaboratories are all examples of *third mission activity*, along with the "triple bottom line" of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social justice. Alternative terms for such influences include social or community *engagement*, public or collaborative *turn*, and digital and embodied *activism*. The digital shift has dominated the agenda for academic libraries since the onset of COVID-19, but we must also be mindful of the social shifts that continue to gather momentum and need be factored into the debate around library transformation.

In 2017, I started collaborating with two American colleagues to chart a course to the *social future* of academic libraries, exploring frameworks and models to advance thinking and practice for our profession in the network society. Our project has involved conference presentations, journal articles and a multi-authored book, including state-of-the-art surveys, conceptual overviews and real-world case studies.[1] Here we share key findings from our research to date along with an initial sketch of the service model emerging from our investigations, namely *Relational Librarianship*. We begin with a graphical abstract of our model and a brief review of emergent practices in academic libraries. We next explain five core concepts informing our model and then introduce an intellectual framework supporting relational practice that can be used to plan, evaluate and communicate the contribution of academic libraries in the participatory network society of the 21st century. We conclude by highlighting seven differences between the relational model and old-style transactional librarianship.

A values-based vision of relational library practice



Emerging library practices

Library thought leaders have advocated a collaborative relational style of service since the early 2000s, inspired by practices in other domains, including banking, business and journalism. Examples are *personal, blended, embedded* and *engaged* librarianship, which all shift traditional reference/subject librarian roles from reactive to proactive mode via closer working relations with library users. The personal relationship between librarians and users is often cited as a defining feature of librarianship, but "personal librarianship" includes building relationships *beyond point-of-need* with a focus on *sustained communication.* Similarly, contact and collaboration are routine aspects of academic liaison, but "embedded librarianship" assumes *consistent contact* and *constant collaboration.*

A Relationship Management Group for HE Libraries was formed in 2015 by UK information professionals with liaison and relationship management roles. Meanwhile US academic libraries have extended liaison relationships beyond academic units to other areas including careers, counselling, disability, international, multicultural, residential and teaching services. We are now seeing a step-change in the application of relational thinking to library practice, which involves deeper relationships with broader constituencies, but also extends relational practice to all parts of the service, all staff in the library and members of the local community, with consequent recognition of relationship building and collaboration as core competencies and critical capabilities for academic libraries.

Library visions and strategies confirm that this is more than a quick operational fix for interactions with students and academics. It is a strategic cultural change that involves reinterpreting values such as open access, community engagement, environmental sustainability and social equity to improve library-institutional alignment. The service model has flipped from collecting to connecting, from standalone to networked, from transactions to relationships, from hierarchy to partnership and from interpersonal to intersubjective.

Librarians now see reference interactions and research consultations as opportunities for making connections and building relationships with students. Libraries are removing the barriers represented by reference desks and service counters, replacing hierarchical across-the-desk transactions with collaborative side-by-side facilitation and moving from authority-based to collegial relationships with learners and researchers. They are also rethinking their roles and relationships with their professional counterparts, in their local communities, in society at large and in a global context. Published case studies show academic libraries worldwide have been incorporating these ideas into their service operations and library strategies, on and beyond their campus, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Real-world case studies:

- In Canada, the University of Saskatchewan Library put *Relationships and Engagement* at the centre of its vision for the future, as a *core strategy* that includes building and strengthening relationships and connections within the Library, within the University and beyond, along with developing relationship building, collaboration and teamwork as *core competencies*.[2]
- In Australia, the University of Melbourne Library replaced barrier-style lending counters and reference desks with a *shared table* functioning as a combined single service point offering *side-by-side* lending, reference and IT support for individuals and groups to align with the *social constructivist pedagogy* and tiered service model adopted by the University.[3]
- In the UK, University College London Library Services is opening access to education and research for a wider public in line with the Connected Curriculum, global mission and participatory vision of the University, partnering with students, faculty, professional services, local communities and public libraries to advance open science and public engagement.[4]

- In the USA, the University of South Dakota Libraries redesigned a mandatory face-to-face information literacy course for an online-only environment using *social network theory* and an embedded librarian model that enabled librarians to collaborate with faculty in meeting *instrumental* (content-oriented) and *relational* teaching goals for both synchronous and asynchronous learners.[5]

Conceptual building blocks

The term ***Network Society*** emerged in the 1990s. It signals that digital communication networks provide both *technical infrastructure* and the *structural design* for economic, social, cultural and political systems, functions, processes and relationships in the 21st century. Manuel Castells's trilogy on *The Information Age* charts developments in electronic communication, a global economy and interactive networks giving rise to *informational capitalism*, multinational enterprises, virtual communities, protest movements, identity politics, digital divides and social exclusion.[6] Jan van Dijk advances a multilevel theory spanning four levels of social units and relations: individual, group/community/ organisational, societal and global. He argues that the *networked individual* is now the basic social unit in the west, though the group (family, community or work team) may be more important in eastern societies.[7]

The key point is the growing influence of social *relations* rather than the social *units* they are linking, hence the turn towards a *relational approach* in social theory and professional practice, which acknowledges that individuals need to be understood in the contexts of their social, economic and cultural relationships.

Networks are the fastest growing form of co-operative arrangement in organisational life, with *multi-partner boundary-spanning* collaborative relationships now commonplace in business, government, education and communities. Networking skills are accordingly a key factor for the success of individuals and organisations. The ability to build and engage with *operational, personal* and *strategic* networks and to manage their interdependencies is required at all levels of organisations and vital for leaders.[8]

Relationship Marketing originated in the USA in the 1980s as a paradigm that puts customer relationships rather than sales transactions at the heart of marketing activity. Relationship (or relational) marketing (RM) contrasts with transaction (database) marketing as a more holistic longer-term strategy using interactive communication to form closer ties with individual customers as equal partners in the service.

Key terms defined

*Network society. "*A modern type of society with an infrastructure of social and media networks that characterizes its mode of organization at every level: individual, group/organizational and societal" [14]

Relationship Marketing. "Strategic management of relationships with all relevant stakeholders. These include not only customers, but also suppliers, influencers, referral sources, internal markets, etc."[15]

Boundaryless Organisation. "an organization without boundaries, where knowledge flows freely from where it was developed to where it is needed within the organization or with customers and suppliers"[16]

Cultural Humility. "an ongoing process that focuses on three things: self-evaluation of one's own background and expectations, committing to redress power imbalances, and building relationships"[17]

Democratic Professionalism. "sharing previously professionalized tasks and encouraging lay participation in ways that enhance and enable broader public engagement and deliberation about major social issues inside and outside professional domains"[18]

*Social Capital. "*the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit"[19]

Social Network Analysis. "Network analysts investigate patterns of relationships that connect members of social systems, and how these patterns channel resources to specific locations in social structures"[20]

All marketing involves relationships, but RM features a *one-to-one relationship* between marketer and consumer; an *interactive process* of co-production and co-consumption; and added value through *mutual interdependence* and collaboration between suppliers and customers. Such relationships blur identity boundaries between providers and users to form a virtually integrated network of actors/organisations involved in delivering the service.

European models of RM include relationships with a wide array of stakeholders and present marketing as embedded in the networks of the service organisation, the market sector and whole social ecosystem. Our service model draws on Nordic RM based on *interactive network theory* and influenced by contemporary thinking on strategic alliances, quality management and organisational design. Evert Gummesson defines RM as "marketing seen as relationships, networks and interaction".[9] At a practical level, multi-stakeholder models such as Gummesson's 30Rs of nano, market and mega relationships and the Cranfield "six markets" model offer readymade frameworks for libraries intent on developing strategies for relational engagement or evaluating their performance in relationship management.[10]

The notion of the ***Boundaryless Organisation*** emerged at the General Electric Company in the fast-moving information-centric business environment of the 1990s as a new mode of working based on collaborative relationships spanning the traditional boundaries of hierarchy, function, institution and geography/culture. Alternative concepts include *virtual, network* and *inside-out* organisations, which all assume boundary-spanning work will deliver speed, flexibility, integration and flexibility. Another version of the model (from healthcare) reconceptualises the boundaries as authority, task, political and identity to highlight the psychological and emotional challenges of working without boundaries.

Boundaryless organisations basically make non-hierarchical cross-functional/multi-professional/ interdisciplinary teams the *modus operandi* for many everyday tasks, instead of limiting their use to special projects. Similar models have been identified in higher education. Celia Whitchurch defines a spectrum of "blended" or *Third Space* roles in the academy, including "bounded", "cross-boundary" and "unbounded" professionals, whose work spans functional, institutional, sectoral and geographical boundaries in ways that many librarians will recognise as typical of current practices in supporting research, learning, growth, wellbeing and sustainability in their institutions.[11]

Cultural Humility originated in the healthcare domain in the 1990s before spreading to social work, education and other sectors. It entered the library discourse around 2017 with Nicole Cooke's groundbreaking work on serving marginalised groups. The concept "stretches the idea of cultural competence" beyond critical self-reflection and respect for cultural differences to a lifelong commitment to redress power imbalances in libraries and build relationships with diverse communities.[12] It has gained momentum in academic libraries from renewed efforts to advance diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging via decolonisation, liberation, indigenisation and revitalisation of library collections, classification systems, reading lists and literacy education. Crucially, practitioners recognise that individuals have multiple identities that may affect their interactions with others in different service contexts, including relationships with other workers in their libraries and parent organisations.

The theory of ***Democratic Professionalism*** was developed by Albert Dzur in the early 2000s as a middle ground between the conservative technocratic-consumerist tradition of professional work and the progressive radical-activist alternatives emerging domains such as law, medicine, social work, university teaching and academic libraries.[13] Such movements reflected growing concerns that professionals had become self-serving and remote, they were not dealing with critical human needs and were failing in their social responsibilities. A key argument centred on their *intermediary roles* and whose interests were being served by their interventions. Dzur argues that deprofessionalisation is not the solution to the professional monopoly of tasks. Instead, what is needed is a redistribution of expertise through sharing of responsibilities, tasks, knowledge, authority and power with citizens.

We should reform professional work as a *collaborative effort* in a co-operation and partnership model that assumes exchange of ideas, co-creation of products and co-direction of services

Tools for thinking

A relational model of collaboration and partnership involves novel roles, a new skill mix and a significant mind-shift. Working differently across boundaries requires new frameworks for planning and designing person-centred and team-based help and facilities and also for assessing and evaluating resources and services. A *resource-based view* of library organisations is needed, such as the perspectives offered by intellectual and *social capital theory*, which promote a holistic view of tangible and intangible library assets and capabilities through a social lens. Academic library interest in mobilising invisible assets began with work on institutional information strategies in the 1990s. The focus on relational/social capital came later and coincides with a huge surge of studies in higher education adopting a social capital paradigm to investigate diversity, equity and inclusion issues.

Social capital is widely used to survey personal networks, neighbourhood belonging, community relationships, civic engagement and other indicators of social wellbeing. It is a complex concept with multidisciplinary origins and varying definitions, but this pluralism offers versatility as an analytical and evaluative framework. The various conceptions share an interest in *relationships* and *resources*, specifically how personal and social relationships of individuals and groups generate and facilitate *access* to resources. Three overlapping strands of thinking focus on the *symbolic, network* and *normative* dimensions of relationships. Leading theorists concentrate on different dimensions, but subscribe to the same basic thesis that *relationships* have the potential to provide *resources* that can be mobilised for *social action*.

Conceptions of social capital

Perspective	*Relevant terms and concepts*	*Key theorists*
Symbolic (cognitive, critical)	credentials, culture, dispositions, distinction, field, habitus, language, power, property, qualifications, recognition, reputation, social reproduction	Pierre Bourdieu
Network (structural, organisational)	bridge, brokerage, closure, density, expressive and instrumental action, embeddedness, heterophily and homophily, multiplexity, nodes, positionality, prestige, structural holes, strength of weak ties	Ronald Burt Mark Granovetter Nan Lin
Normative (behavioural, relational)	bonding, bridging, closure, collective action, common understanding, community, identities, institutions, mutuality, obligations, reciprocity, social norms, trust and trustworthiness	James Coleman Elinor Ostrom Robert Putnam

All three perspectives have been used by education and library researchers, with some scholars combining different theories for more nuanced understandings of complex situations. Recent higher education studies have investigated the social networks and relationships of students and academics from minority groups at different stages of their scholarly careers and how they provide social support and resources enabling progress and success. Academic librarians have used symbolic, network and/or normative perspectives to review the roles and relationships of liaison librarians and library leaders and to refocus information literacy instruction and library space design towards civic education and community engagement. They have also used *social network analysis* to examine the collaborative networks of researchers, the personal networks of practitioner-researchers and member behaviour in resource-sharing networks.

Theory into practice

Our book contains nine case studies illustrating how social capital concepts and theories can facilitate organisational learning, quality improvement and collaborative relationships with internal and external stakeholders for different activities including academic liaison, collection development,

functional librarianship, information literacy, learning spaces, library fundraising, service design, subject specialisation and student success.

Examples of applications:

- Amanda Folk integrated Bourdieu's *cultural capital* and *social reproduction* concepts with *situated learning* theory to explore challenges for first-generation students in developing the academic literacies needed for success, and propose expanded roles for librarians as mediators between students and faculty on the (re)design of research assignments and development of support networks.
- Kathryn Dilworth integrated philanthropy research with Putnam's concepts of *bridging* and *bonding social capital* to explain how libraries can use a *Social Capital Fundraising Model* to involve more staff in building relationships with alumni, stewarding previous and future donors and converting library contacts into committed funders of collections and innovation projects.
- Alice Rogers, Sara Sweeney Bear and Scott Fralin used *social network analysis* as an impact assessment tool to investigate the *intensity, multiplexity* and *reciprocity* of relationships developed among student learners, library staff, teaching faculty and external partners via participation in a suite of collaborative spaces and services at Virginia Tech Libraries.
- Andrea Kosavic and Minglu Wang combined symbolic, network and normative perspectives to gain new insights into *cultural*, *structural* and *behavioural* factors enabling libraries to become trusted partners in research data management, including the *positional power* of library directors, *bridging ties* of subject liaisons and their *bonding relationships* with functional specialists.

Relational librarianship is work in progress. Our model is grounded in practice and will evolve as new evidence emerges from the field. Our concluding table enables librarians to track their journey from a transactional to a relational library.

Service models compared

Transactional Librarianship **(support service)**	***Relational Librarianship*** **(collaborative culture)**
One-shot, short-term contacts and encounters	Ongoing, long-term connections and experiences
One-way, function-based transactions (hierarchical, departmentally siloed)	Two-way, process-based interactions (cross-functional, multi-professional)
Library-centric information communicated via fixed service points or static web pages	User-centric resources and help embedded in learner, teacher and researcher workflows
Detached, reactive, hands-off, across-the-desk directions and instruction	Engaged, anticipatory, hands-on, side-by-side advice and guidance
Impersonal, standardised offerings (One size fits all)	Personal, customised assistance (Every scholar their resource)
Reducing costs by pushing users towards self-help and self-service (Do It Yourself)	Adding value by working with stakeholders as partners and co-creators (Doing It Together)
Monoculturalist: identity blind with equality mindset, culturally conservative	Multiculturalist: identity conscious and equity centred, culturally relevant and sustaining
Librarians as Technocratic Professionals – ***delivering authoritative service interventions***	**Librarians as Democratic Professionals –** ***building transformative social relationships***

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