Keep Playing: Innovative Strategies for Analyzing Dilemmas in Library Instruction

"My freedom and fulfillment come from acting to create something that I believe in. I can choose this perspective independently of whether the world supports or rewards or even wants this from me." (Block, 2002)

Introduction

At CCLI 2014, I led an interactive session guiding participants through a set of thought exercises to identify and challenge their assumptions about the challenges they face in their work. The exercises are available at: http://cunninghamhannon.wordpress.com/category/paradoxes-and-play/. In the current paper, I offer background and additional details about the organizational theories and research findings from my study of how community college librarians in southern California sustain their library instruction programs. I wrote about my study previously in *Paradoxes and Play: An Emergent Theory of How Community College Librarians Sustain Library Instruction Programs*.

Levels of Interaction

Instruction librarians work at multiple levels of their organizations to accomplish their goals for students' learning. Because library instruction does not generate revenue and is not part of traditional institutional structures instruction librarians are responsible for creating a context for their teaching that will make it relevant and effective. This requires work at levels well-beyond their classroom and library in order to build partnerships and influence policies (Kaplowitz & Grassian, 2005). The nested levels of interaction where instruction librarians are working each have influence one another as the actions librarians take at one level will affect the choices available to them at other levels. Figure 1 illustrates the nested levels of interaction where instruction librarians are working.

Tensions in Librarians' work

Each level of interaction in librarians' work presents specific challenges. Tensions emerge when librarians are trying to achieve a goal or solve a problem in their work and are faced with multiple

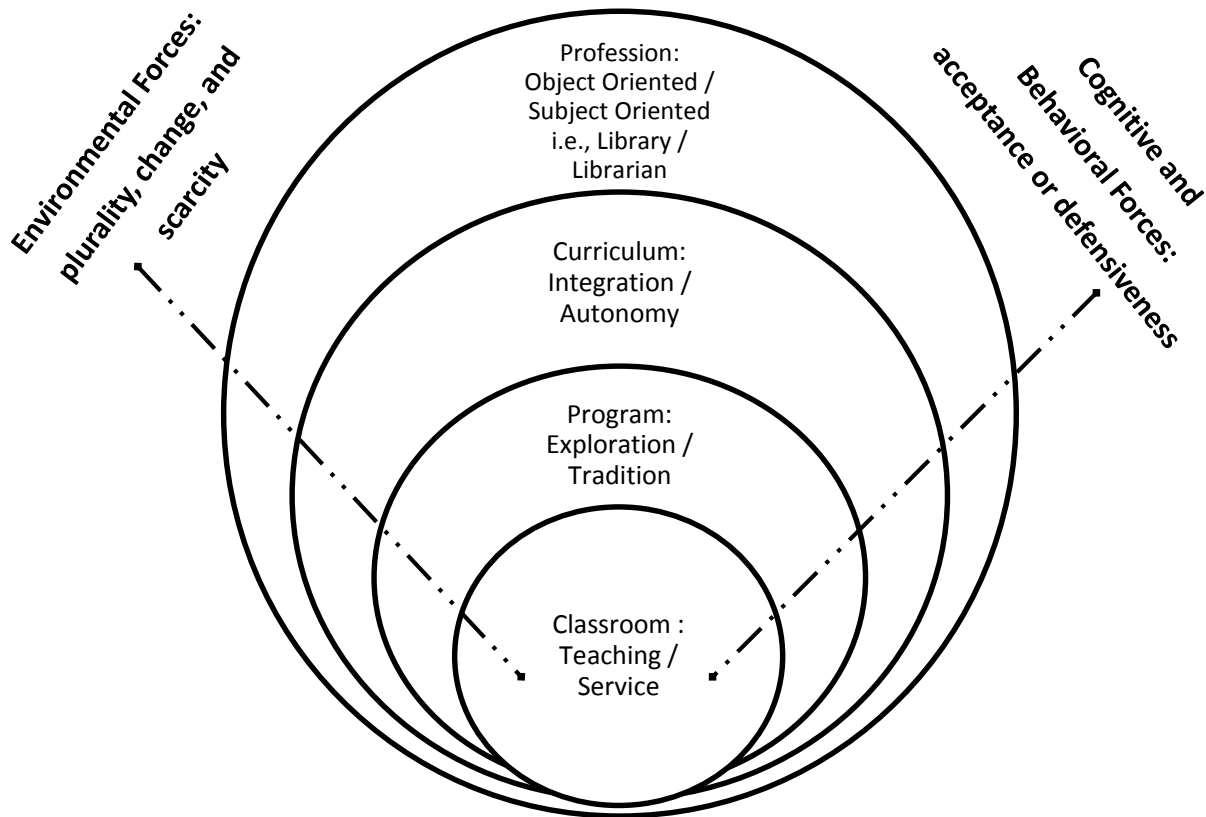Figure 1: Levels of Interaction for Instruction Librarians' Work
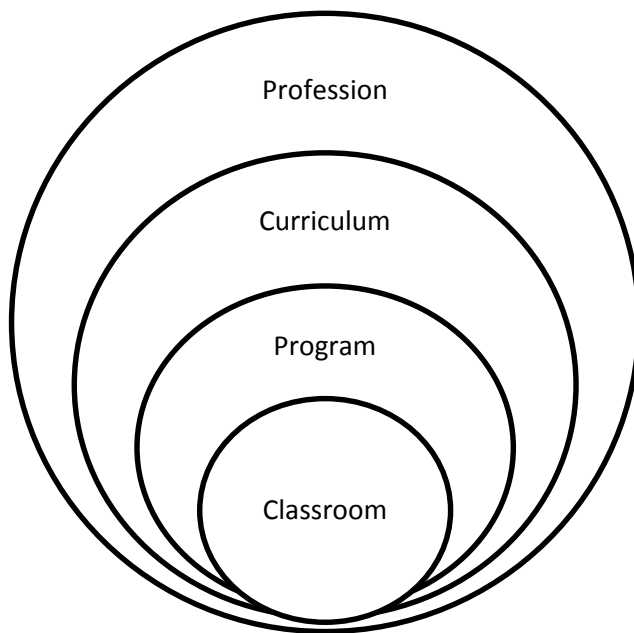
feasible options that compete for resources like time, attention, or money. Figure 2 illustrates the

tensions that are common at each level of instruction librarians' work.

When Tensions become Paradoxes

Tensions become paradoxes when the competing options are mutually exclusive and cannot be pursued

simultaneously because they contradict one another (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In these situations, it can be

tempting to think that we would benefit from applying strict rationality and using information to decide

on the best course of action. And though librarians may disagree about how to define "best," they often

intuitively sense that there is a right answer to a dilemma and that with more time or information they

could choose correctly. Unfortunately, waiting for better information or the right choice to become

obvious can lead to paralysis. What may at first seem like a mess that we can clean up using our reason

often turns out to be a paradox that will not go away even when we think we have solved it. When the

competing priorities come from the same root (e.g., the need for belonging, the need for success, or the

need to prepare for the future), selecting one option and rejecting the other becomes impossible

(Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Both priorities will keep re-surfacing and, if ignored, causing disruption, over time.

Figure 2: Paradoxes and Forces at Each Level of Interaction

Environmental Forces: plurality, change, and scarcity

Cognitive and Behavioral Forces: acceptance or defensiveness

Profession:
Object Oriented /
Subject Oriented
i.e., Library /
Librarian

Curriculum:
Integration /
Autonomy

Program:
Exploration /
Tradition

Classroom :
Teaching /
Service

People working in organizations are likely to experience the following paradoxes: (a) the tension between Learning (i.e., "the need to change") and Belonging (i.e., "the desire to retain a developed sense of self and purpose"), (b) the tension between Learning (i.e., "building capabilities for the future) and Performing (i.e., "ensuring success in the present"), and (c) the tension between Belonging and Performing (i.e., "when identification and goals clash") (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 384). These paradoxes reveal the complexity of organizations and the challenge of making decisions when learning never ends, individuals' identities within the organization are always being re-negotiated, and standards for performance are undefined. The generic paradoxes associated with learning, belonging, and performing play out in specific ways for librarians at each level of their work.

In the Library Classroom (Service v. Teaching)

For librarians who mostly teach one-shot or workshop instruction, this is the core site of their work. This is where librarians are in direct contact with students and where the effects of their work at other levels are distilled into the brief session that they hope will put students on a track toward self-sufficiency. The primary paradox of the classroom is between two different intentions that librarians can bring to their instruction: teaching or service.

Teaching requires that the librarian pursue her own goals for student learning during instruction. Teaching information competency (rather than discrete research techniques) also suggests transcending the immediate requirements of students' assignments and connecting the content of instruction, instead, to skills and habits of mind that students will apply beyond the current class.

A service orientation in instruction implies external motivation for librarians' choices in the classroom. Librarians who emphasize service in their instruction are focused on interpreting and satisfying another faculty member's goals for student learning. Often they consider it the best way to be relevant to students who are also trying to interpret and satisfy their professors' requirements for the assignment.

Although librarians may mix elements of service and elements of teaching into a single instruction session, at each moment they are having to make a decision between the two approaches. And, overall, either service or teaching will be more emphasized in the session. In fact, even before the session, librarians are deciding which role to favor. Taking a service approach often results in negotiations with faculty to try to get professors to be clearer about their goals and their expectations. Taking a teaching approach would result in negotiations about the content of professors' goals and expectations and librarians would often find they needed to offer recommendations to faculty about how to improve their assignment instructions for students. Fortunately, professors' expectations may be more responsive to librarians' actions than the librarians themselves realize, and by presenting

alternatives for achieving the same instructional goals, librarians influence them. Librarians who feel burnt out in their instruction often blame professors for not valuing the library enough or they feel constrained by the structures of their instruction programs. The balance between service and teaching will not come from choosing something in the middle. Librarians who want to stay energized in their classrooms will have to make strategic decisions, choosing when to challenge their roles by prioritizing their teaching and when to cultivate more traditional relationships with faculty by emphasizing their service.

In the Library's Instruction Program (Exploration v. Tradition)

Beyond the choices they make in their own classrooms, library instruction coordinators are also sensitive to the tension between maintaining the status quo of their programs and exploring new approaches that would shake things up. As librarians face this tension and consider alternative approaches to instruction, they have to take into account the staffing, space, outreach, and skills that have supported their traditional approaches because these established practices may work against the innovations they are considering. Creating new on-line tutorials or embedded relationships with research-intensive courses can feel impossible when all of your staff and funds are locked into structures designed for one-shots. On the other hand, it may feel threatening when traditional modes of instruction that seem to be working just fine are challenged by changes in demand, administrator priorities, or students' needs. Some librarians have been so committed to one way of offering instruction that they have reached their capacity and cannot offer any more in that mode. But when everything is already dedicated to one way of teaching, no surplus resources remain to develop new scalable modes of instruction (like interactive tutorials).

Deciding which services, practices, policies, etc. to stop is just as important as deciding which innovations to try. Choosing just one—either tradition or exploration—is not an option. Instead, librarians must get the benefits they can from their success in the present while always keeping some

proportion of their resources flexible enough so they can pilot new ideas. And if the new ideas gain

traction, librarians have to be prepared to cut back on old techniques to make space for new ones.

In the Institution (Integration v. Autonomy in the Curriculum)

Working at the level of institutional curriculum, librarians make calculations about which

approaches will have the greatest influence on students' information literacy. At this level they

encounter a tension between emphasizing information literacy as librarians' area of expertise and

emphasizing information literacy as a responsibility that faculty across the disciplines share. They can

pursue curricular changes that would put them in charge of teaching information literacy and assessing

those student learning outcomes (often this takes the form of a required one-unit course). Or they can

support curriculum that diffuses the responsibility for teaching and assessing information literacy among

all academic faculty (through a system that designates a variety of courses that fulfill that requirement).

This tension between librarians' control and the integration of information literacy into general

education (or other courses) can create uncertainty for librarians. It's not always immediately clear how

much they risk by either sharing responsibility for information literacy or by trying to establish their

autonomy as experts in that area. Often the final decision about how information literacy will be taught

and assessed as an institutional outcome is not made by the librarians, alone. Nevertheless, it's

common for librarians to have a place at the table when these decisions are being made for the first

time or when revisions are considered. Librarians who are in the position to make recommendations

should remember that there is no perfect solution to this paradox between integration and autonomy.

If they can remember that any decision, even at the curricular level, is just temporary, then they can find

a way to approach the final decision with a sense of playfulness and possibility.

When analyzing the paradoxes in your work, keep in mind the key environmental forces that

make paradoxes more acute. These forces are diffuse power that lead to unclear standards for success

(i.e., plurality), conflicting short- and long-term goals (i.e., change), and resource limitations (i.e.,

temporal, financial, or personnel scarcity) (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Figure 2 illustrates the relationship among the typical paradoxes that instruction librarians experience at each level of their work and the forces that intensify the urgency of those paradoxes.

Techniques for Playing with Paradoxes

When you've recognized that you're dealing with a paradox in your work, you might feel freed from the pressure to pick one priority over the other (Luscher & Lewis, 2008). You'll need to think creatively in order to keep the paradox open and benefit from the strengths of both approaches (e.g., teaching and service, tradition and exploration) or to maximize the benefits of the hand you've been dealt while recognizing that it probably will change again (e.g., autonomy or integration). The following is a list of the facets of playing with paradoxes. These habits of mind will empower you to engage with paradoxes:

- Hold your goals lightly. Keep the end in mind so that as circumstances change you'll see unexpected changes as possibilities more often than road blocks.

- Embrace iteration. By welcoming the fact that no project is ever finished and no policy is every permanent, you'll benefit from getting the chance to try again because it brings the possibility for improvement (or at least excitement).

- Find allies. Taking a playful approach to developing professional relationships will result in more creative partnerships since the purpose of having allies is to seek out new challenges, not to retrench.

- Enter the "arena of confrontation" and learn the rules of engagement (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980). Every institution has sites where decisions get made and resources get allocated (whether formally or informally). One element of play is putting yourself in these places and learning the rules. It's often only by learning the rules that you will find ways to use them to students' advantage or bend, change, or reinterpret them so that you create a context where your instruction will be valuable to students.

- Challenge the role you've been assigned. It's a source of power to surprise people and librarians have an advantage because many of the students, faculty, staff, and administrators we work with already make assumptions about our profession. Departing from your role puts people off guard which can open new opportunities to negotiate your relationship to them or expand your range of freedom to act in students' best interest (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980, p. 49).

- Consciously develop an abundance mindset (Smith & Lewis, 2011). When asking for more resources is not an immediate option, developing the ability to make the most of what is available to you promotes creative problem-solving and makes it less likely that you'll fall into either/or thinking that keeps you from seeing alternative solutions.

Recommended Reading

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