Legacies of the past and promises of the future: Challenges for the research library in the 21st century

By Mimi Lam.

On September 20, 2013, the BC Research Library's (BCRL) Group started its 2013 season with a lecture by Philip Kent titled *Challenges for the Research Library in the 21st Century*. An archived webcast of the presentation is available @ http://goo.gl/KZaw0L.

Philip Kent is the University Librarian at the University of Melbourne. Kent was wrapping up a sixteen day trip around the world with a visit to UBC Library.

Kent started with an overview of the University of Melbourne and his library and the rest of his talk considered pertinent issues and challenges for academic libraries in the 21st century.

Overview of the University of Melbourne and its library

The University of Melbourne is a large, multi-campus, multi-disciplinary university and will be celebrating its 160th year. As with UBC, there is a lot of interest in rankings and as a result, higher education has become very competitive.

In 2005, the University of Melbourne implemented a new strategy titled, "Growing Esteem" which implemented revised undergraduate, post-graduate models, and research informed teaching and learning. This strategy led to a modernization of curricula and has been a great opportunity for the library to engage with the university community.

Future of the academic library

Building on the recent changes at the University of Melbourne Library, Kent described the Council of Australian University Libraries' (CAUL) top ten issues:

1. Staffing
2. Supporting research
3. Developing strategies for changing collections
4. Demonstrating value and impact
5. Realigned services for new delivery paradigms
6. Redeveloping facilities and physical infrastructure
7. Adjusting to new scholarly publishing models
8. New delivery modes for teaching and learning
9. Coping with changes with funding
10. Dealing with constant changes to technology

In addition to CAUL's top ten issues, Kent also cites IFLA's trends report as a starting point for stimulating debate and discussion in planning for the future of the libraries.

Philip Kent's top five

Through collaboration and discussion, Kent has condensed this myriad of issues into his top five issues facing libraries.

1. **Partnering Research**

At the University of Melbourne Library, the term "partnering" research is used since the word "support" suggests a more pejorative role. Taking on the role of research partner is very much the story that libraries are experiencing around the world. Libraries have increased roles in the research lifecycle in gathering data and raw materials, research training, research data management, curation and preservation, repository creation for research data.

Open access repositories and the implications for the future are at the forefront. The White House directive on expanding open access and the formation of CHORUS and SHARE is being closely followed by academic libraries worldwide.

Another new role for librarians includes digitization which essentially is creating research infrastructure. Digitization creates mechanisms that underpin the university's performance in research, and expose rare and special content to the world.

2. **Embedded within Learning and Teaching**

As a result of the recent curricula refresh, the University of Melbourne has been able to get involved in learning and teaching. One key realization in this increased role is that the library no longer has enough resources to touch every student in a meaningful way in terms of instruction and scholarly literacy. Kent went on to describe an example of research-led teaching and learning: The University of Melbourne Library has a collection of phonograms of political campaign advertisements that were digitized and made available online. As a result, researchers have written papers about this collection and a faculty member re-wrote curricula based on this collection of recordings. The digitized collection offered an exciting potential for participation in teaching and learning and really demonstrated the value of the library.

Another example of the library being embedded in learning and teaching is the participation in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). University of Melbourne joined Coursera and the library was able to assign one librarian to each course to recommend resources, locate open access sources, trace primary source material, etc. In addition, the library hosted an in-person meet-up at the library for one of the courses. As a result of this participation, the library has gathered interesting learning analytics.

3.   21st century collections

Kent mused that libraries are still very much anchored in the print. A novel way to look at collections is to divide them into commodity and non-commodity collections. The embracing of electronic resources has resulted in libraries having pretty much the same collection (commodity collections). Today, the rare and special collections differentiate libraries from one another. The University of Melbourne Library has digitized their volume of the Sarum Brevary, collaborated with other institutions on joint exhibits of the Piranesi collection, and refurbished the Peter Grainger Museum and its programs.

4.   Library as place

Kent observed that libraries have been immensely successful in creating inspiring scholarly spaces that make the library the heart of the institution. This success has, in a way, made librarians victims of our own success by the constant demand for space. Kent showed examples of some revitalized spaces at the University of Melbourne. The Brownless Biomedical Library has a night club feel due to the sheer curtains and bright colours. The Giblin Eunson Library boasts 500 additional seats and has a modernist décor.

The University of Melbourne library is also involved in future building projects such as the new Architecture, Planning and Building Project where the library is the heart of the building. Universities are increasingly interested in research buildings which house research collections, reading rooms, researcher spaces, etc. Kent speaks about visiting the University of Manchester where they have created armchairs with the names of Nobel laureates on them in order to inspire students.

5.   New ways of working

New ways of working is an important issue that everyone is struggling with. Libraries are speculating on what work will look like in the future: Will we actually become print-free? How will we fill the void of aging work forces and mass retirements? How will we retain the corporate memory of the departing staff? What other emerging fields will we need to acquire skills and training? What will models of service look like (i.e. subject specialists vs. service teams)? How will we attract/recruit the skills and experience that we need for these positions?

Conclusion

Kent ended his talk with a quote from Richard Ovenden, "Our challenges can be summed up in one sentence: matching the legacy of the past with the promise of the future." Although this may seem like a difficult undertaking, he noted that librarians are particularly good at networking and sharing knowledge so we will not be alone in facing theses challenges.

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