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New and Noteworthy

Just Give 'Em Something New? How We Think about Innovation in Libraries

Jennifer A. Bartlett

“The net result of rethinking libraries as institutions, and the role of librarians as professionals, will be a balance between the traditional and the innovative. The most visionary librarians have sought to strike this balance for a long time. The historical principles of librarianship—universal access to information, individual privacy, freedom of expression, and truth above all else—are as necessary now as they have ever been and must persist. At the same time, the balance of library leadership needs to swing more forcefully toward the new or libraries will fade in their significance to the American public.” – John Palfrey, 2015¹

Libraries have long been in the challenging position of both preserving the past and foreseeing the future. What historical collections should be kept? What new services should be offered? How do we balance our patrons' need for up-to-date services and collections with our responsibility to preservation of knowledge? We face numerous pressures from our stakeholders and various constituencies to offer something for everyone, and a frequent word that occurs in these conversations is "innovation." But what does that mean? Does "innovation" just mean "new"? If other libraries are already doing it, is it still innovative?

Leadership author and speaker Scott Berkun thinks the word shouldn't be used at all (along with "paradigm shift," "transformative," and "breakthrough"), but if unavoidable, he offers a simple definition: "Innovation is significant positive change."² From an information professional's perspective, the *Journal of Library Innovation (JOLI)*, which recently ceased publication, offers the following useful framework for how we as librarians might think about innovative practices:

- The discovery of unmet user needs.
- The introduction of new services or the retooling of traditional services resulting in a better user experience.
- Creative collaboration between libraries, or between libraries and other types of institutions, resulting in demonstrable improvements in service to users.
- Implementing new technologies to improve and extend library service to meet user needs.
- Explorations of the future of libraries.
- Pilot testing unconventional ideas and services.
- Redefining the roles of library staff to better serve users.
- Developing processes that encourage organizational innovation.
- Reaching out to and engaging library users and non-users in new and creative ways.
- Creative library instruction and patron programming.

- Finding new ways to make library collections or library facilities more useful to users.³

As we think about what innovation means for libraries and information organizations, it becomes clear that it's not just another term for offering something new and different. Fortunately, library literature abounds with interesting and valuable takes on the often perplexing theme of "innovation," far too many to be adequately covered in one column. The titles that follow are some of the more recent.

Anthony Molaro and Leah White's *Library Innovation Toolkit*, published in 2015 by ALA Editions,⁴ is a good collection of theoretical essays and case studies on innovative library programs and practices in the areas of organizational culture, staff, outreach, technology, physical spaces and library programming. The book begins with perhaps the most important component of innovation: an open, entrepreneurial organizational mindset. Essays on beginner's mind, organizational structure, trend monitoring, and diversity are included in this section. Subsequent sections offer ideas including digital media labs, comic conventions, collection promotion through retailing techniques, local TED-style talks, writing clubs, and more. Not all examples will be useful in all library settings, but the interesting mix of stories and ideas are an easy introduction to how new programs can generate excitement among library staff and users.

An important takeaway from the *Toolkit* (and one that is often easy to forget) is the idea that technology itself is not necessarily the innovation, although it can certainly be a key component. A new database or website design that does not meet the needs of its users is just different, and not necessarily in a good way. As the authors emphasize, "innovation is much less focused on technology and much more focused on people, either staff or patrons. Innovation happens through people (library staff) to improve services and experiences for the community (patrons)" (xvi). However, new technologies employed in the service of improved patron experience are indeed what many people think of when the word "innovation" is mentioned, and strong IT staffing and services are important to a thriving library.

The October 2013 issue of *Library Technology Reports*,⁵ although a bit dated at this point, offers a well-researched and thoughtful framework for thinking about innovative library practices from an information technology perspective. In *Technological Innovation: Perceptions and Definitions*, author Jason Vaughan, Director of Library Technologies at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, presents and analyzes responses from a Spring 2013 ten-question survey of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) directors focusing on how technological innovation influences and affects their organizations. Vaughan's original goal in conducting his research was to gain insight into the perplexing question "what does innovation mean?" by gathering opinions from a group of academic library leaders. Chapter 2 of his report offers a professional literature review, and Chapter 3 discusses the questions and responses from the ARL survey.

In the literature review, Vaughan emphasizes the value of looking outside our own industry for new ideas:

"...there's certainly been talk in various library and higher education venues about how libraries and academia could look outward to the corporate world and steal a few moves from the playbook—to assist, model, or inform how libraries could adapt to an increasingly dynamic environment, compete for budget allocations, recruit customers (students), etc. " (11).

Companies that come to mind include Apple, Google, IBM, and Samsung. Another good example is General Electric, whose annual Global Innovation Barometer surveys senior business leaders from around the world to gauge how they view innovation and its influence on business strategies.⁶

Each chapter of this special issue is thoroughly researched, and readers should find the extensive footnotes valuable for further reading, at least for books and articles up to 2013. Although the issue focuses on academic libraries, it is also an interesting read for professionals in other types of libraries.

Ronald Jantz, Digital Library Architect at Rutgers University Libraries and a frequent contributor to the literature on innovation, discusses the process of implementation and support of innovative practices in a recent *College & Research Libraries* article.⁷ His recent research involves the study of innovation performance in research libraries, and focuses on results of a study involving 50 ARL libraries. Jantz finds that five variables are significant predictors of the level of innovation in research libraries: organizational size, integration of the top management team (behavioral integration), a consensus on decision-making in the leadership team (decision awareness), the level of specialization of library functions (structural differentiation), and an ability to explore new activities while maintaining current services (ambidextrous orientation). In addition to analysis of the research, the study also includes a useful appendix listing example innovations and a thorough bibliography for further reading.

Another thought-provoking discussion of the meaning of innovation in libraries is a recent editorial by Scott Walter and R. David Lankes, "The **Innovation** Agenda."⁸ Walter and Lankes posit that the time has come for libraries to articulate their contribution to the innovation agenda, just as they have addressed their value through such projects as the ACRL Value of Academic Libraries report. The appearance of *U.S. News & World Report's* inaugural "Most Innovative Schools" ranking is another indication that the importance of innovation as an organizational measure is significant. Innovation as a measure of organizational success needs to be defined: "We must focus on a definition of innovation that looks beyond economic indicators to the educational mission of the academy, e.g., a novel approach or application of an existing idea, process, or invention that leads to increased commitment to an institution's mission, and to meaningful impact for an institution's community" (855).

Although academic libraries tend to dominate the literature in discussions of innovative practice, many of the ideas and topics discussed in these works are relevant to professionals in other libraries. A chapter in the special *College & Undergraduate Libraries* issue "The Business of Libraries," Julie Evener's "Innovation in the Library: How to Engage Employees, Cultivate Creativity, and Create Buy-In for New Ideas" is a discussion of how business practices can be profitably applied in a library setting to motivate and engage employees in a "culture of innovation."⁹ In this type of workplace, entrepreneurship and experimentation are rewarded. So too must library managers be effective advocates for new services and programs to help serve their users more effectively.

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¹ Palfrey, John G. 2015. *BiblioTech: why libraries matter more than ever in the age of Google*. New York: Basic Books. ISBN 9780465042999.

² Berkun, Scott. (2013). The best definition of innovation. *Scottberkun.com*. Available at <http://scottberkun.com/2013/the-best-definition-of-innovation>. In addition to being a prolific blogger and speaker, Berkun is the author of six books, including *The Myths of Innovation* (O'Reilly, 2010). He blogs at <http://scottberkun.com>.

³ "Editorial Policies: Focus and Scope," available at <http://www.libraryinnovation.org/about/editorialPolicies#focusAndScope>. *JOLI* (ISSN 1947-525X) was an open access, peer-reviewed journal founded in 2010 by the Western New York Library Resources Council. The last issue was published in Fall 2015. Information about the journal and archived issues are currently available at <http://www.libraryinnovation.org/index>.

⁴ Molaro, Anthony and White, Leah L., eds. 2015. *The library innovation toolkit: ideas, strategies, and programs*. Chicago: ALA Editions. ISBN 978-0-8389-1274-4.

⁵ Vaughan, Jason. 2013. *Technological innovation: perceptions and definitions [Library technology reports, v. 49, no. 7]*. Chicago: American Library Association. ISBN 9780838959046.

⁶ See the most recent report at <http://www.gereports.com/innovation-barometer-2014/>.

⁷ Jantz, R. C. 2015. The determinants of organizational innovation: an interpretation and implications for research libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 76(4), 512-536.

⁸ Walter, Scott, and R. David Lankes. 2015. The innovation agenda. *College & Research Libraries*, 76.7: 854-858.

⁹ Evener, Julie. 2015. Innovation in the library: how to engage employees, cultivate creativity, and create buy-in for new ideas." *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 22, no. 3/4: 296-311.