The incredible embeddable librarian

By: Jenny Dale and Lynda Kellam

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Abstract:

A teacher-librarian works closely with an Advanced Placement English composition teacher to design research-based assignments for the class. She is not the primary instructor, nor does she have access to grades, but she provides detailed feedback on the quality and appropriateness of sources that students choose for their papers.

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Article:

***Note: Full text of article below

THE INCREDIBLE EMBEDDABLE LIBRARIAN

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NEW ROLES, NEW RESPONSIBILITIES

A teacher-librarian works closely with an Advanced Placement English composition teacher to design research-based assignments for the class. She is not the primary instructor, nor does she have access to grades, but she provides detailed feedback on the quality and appropriateness of sources that students choose for their papers.

A university reference librarian is a member of the course management application for an online art history survey course. She initially only participates in the discussion board, pointing students to resources and answering questions about research. Over time and in collaboration with the professor, she has created short, graded source evaluation assignments to help students develop their information literacy skills. These assignments also help to remind the students that she is available and part of the experience.

An information specialist at a large corporation is part of a working group tasked with developing a comprehensive marketing campaign for a new product. He works closely with the other team members, finding relevant market data and research, and spends a significant amount of time working on this project.

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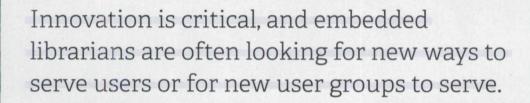
What do these librarians and information professionals, all in different settings and with unique roles, have in common? They are all embedded librarians. Their levels and modes of embeddedness differ, but each one is intentionally integrated into a specific user community.

DEFINING EMBEDDEDNESS

The "embedded librarian" as a concept has emerged in the literature only recently, but has quickly gained footing as a model of practice. Many scholarly explorations of embedded librarianship have been published, though no two works define this concept in the exact same way. David Shumaker's description seems to be particularly apt: "Embedded librarianship involves the delivery of highly customized and highly valued information and knowledge services to a customer group with well-defined needs" (2010, 11). These ideas of customized and value-added services for specific communities emerge again and again in the literature on embeddedness.

Embedded librarianship is not "one size fits all." Each partnership between a librarian and a community is unique, and the level and types of services provided are customized based on the needs of that particular community. A community could be a class, an academic program, a student organization, or any of a number of different types of user groups. In higher education, we can trace the idea of embeddedness back to the traditional reference librarian duty of serving as a subject liaison. The subject liaison role traditionally focused on the library collection—purchasing monographs, periodicals, and electronic resources for a specific department. The embedded librarian can still provide collection specialization, but their focus is addressing the wide-ranging needs of their

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user community. Barbara Dewey advocates for this more comprehensive approach, stating, "The most effective collaborations are multi-dimensional, addressing more than just collection development. Integration of information literacy skills into individual departmental curriculum, research consultation, and partnerships in research and teaching should also be part of the library liaison with departments" (11). This integration can transform a traditional subject liaison relationship into a more embedded one.

ENGAGING WITH THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The term "embedded librarian" was originally borrowed from the "embedded journalist" concept during the invasion of Iraq (Dewey 2005; Shumaker 2009). The actual use of the term, however, is quite different. Embedded journalists are included with deployments, but their goal is to document the action, not engage in war. In contrast, embedded librarians should engage with the community. They do not sit passively on the sidelines waiting for "patrons." Instead, they are proactive in promoting their unique skills as librarians or (at times) subject specialists. Shumaker writes, "the librarian becomes a member of the customer community rather than a service provider standing apart" (2009, 240). Rather than waiting for users to come to us, we are being proactive about the needs of our assigned (or chosen) communities. We are attempting to "build relationships so we can gain deeper insights into what our customers are doing and how they will use the information we provide" (2009, 240).

As librarians working in a university setting, we have seen and experienced embeddedness in a variety of ways. Colleagues who are embedded in course management systems actively participate in online classes and work with instructors to design assignments. Our business and economics librarian team teaches a course in the marketing program at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro (UNCG) and is embedded in other ways in the business school. Our political science liaison will be teaching a required course for political science majors in the coming academic year. These examples of embeddedness have grown from our colleagues' proactive efforts to engage with a specific academic community—a class, a program, or a department.

NEW ROLES MEAN NEW OPTIONS

In recent years, we have become more actively involved in forming relationships with communities that are not strictly academic or curricular in nature. We have both been embedded in campus learning communities. Our university is significantly increasing the number of learning communities offered to UNCG students. These communities take many shapes and sizes. Some include a residential and academic component, where students live together in a residence hall and take a common course or set of courses; some include a residential component without an academic component but integrate co-curricular or service learning opportunities; and some involve no residential component but offer students the opportunity to take courses with a common cohort of classmates.

Our oldest living-learning community, based on the residential college model where students live together in a residence hall and take a common core curriculum, has provided significant opportunities for embeddedness. One of the authors is the "in-house librarian" for this program. She is considered an integral part of the residential college staff, provides office hours in the residence hall on a weekly basis, and has trained a "library first responder," a student in the program who is on hand to support her peers with research and library questions after hours. This level of embeddedness requires a significant investment of time but means that the librarian is truly a part of the community she serves.

START WITH A PILOT PROJECT

While embedded librarian relationships may start and grow organically, it is critical to approach opportunities for embeddedness realistically. Shumaker (2009) stresses assessing your (and your library's) readiness, and suggests starting with a pilot program and then making changes based on an assessment of that program. All collaborators involved in the embedded

we did, and she read/listened to fifteen chapters that night and was able to catch up with her class!"

6. On our pre-survey the average response to the question, "Do you wish there were more audiobooks available in this library?" was "3–Agree." On the post-survey, the average response was "4–Strongly agree."

TECHNICAL ISSUES

Of course, it hasn't all been rosy. One librarian called me to see if I could help her troubleshoot because she was getting a strange error message while trying to download a book. I could hear the frustration in her voice, and she said it had been hours of wasted time. Another librarian told me that despite the training she received in how to download, she was still not comfortable enough to really promote the mp3 players in her library. One school library spent most of the year trying to get a computer set up as a downloading station and kept running into delay after delay, but once they finally did have that station set up, their program went "gangbusters"!

Special education teachers reported an average 48 percent increase in reading assignment completion.

A MANDATE MET

It was a very busy and successful year. We accomplished our goal of strengthening audio programs in our participating libraries. NW BOCES was able to meet its mandate. We were able to document some of the many benefits that come with providing audio support for struggling and reluctant readers. I hope that by reading this article, you may be inspired to make that push and give the extra effort to get your own audiobook program going or strengthen your existing one.

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relationship must have a clear understanding of each partner's roles and responsibilities. Clear agreements are key to a successful project. The level of embeddedness within the residential college described above, for instance, is different than that which the first-year instruction coordinator provides to first-year learning communities, which typically require less research support and fewer office hours.

ASSESS YOUR OWN READINESS

Identifying partners and situations that might be a good fit for embeddedness is a great place to start, but we strongly advise assessing your own readiness first. Starting small is always a good idea, particularly if you are on your own in your library. Consider expanding relationships that you already have with academic classes as a starting point. If you work frequently with a particular teacher and consider them to be an advocate for information literacy, you may already have a willing collaborator. Looking beyond traditional academic settings can also be a great way to start a program of embeddedness. Innovation is critical, and embedded librarians are often looking for new ways to serve users or for new user groups to serve. Working with student groups or clubs at your school might be another way to test the waters of embedded librarianship.

EXPERIENCE-BASED BEST PRACTICES

From our own experiences with embeddedness, we have developed a list of what we consider best practices:

1. **Be realistic about your time and your resources**. Embedded librarians often forge these partnerships in addition to their day-to-day work, so be honest with yourself about the time and energy you truly have available.

2. **Establish clear lines of communication**. It is critical that your collaborators understand what they can expect from you in this relationship, and that you know what you can expect from them. Communication, including regular check-ins about the process, is key to a successful embedded librarian program.

3. **Be innovative**. There may be user groups that you have never worked with, but who might benefit from your expertise.

4. **Assess your program**. At the end of a class unit, semester, or school year, look critically at the work you have done. Have you spent more or less time than you expected? Did all partners in the project consider it successful? Did you feel that you were truly integrated into the program?

INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Embedded librarianship takes many forms and can be widely interpreted. Successful programs have one common characteristic: The focus is on actively developing and enhancing relationships with users. Librarians will continue to be key players in any academic environment, but our roles are changing. As we seek opportunities for embeddedness, we keep Barbara Dewey's words in mind: "Innovative and exciting collaborations account for a major part of the library's transition from passive to active, reactive to proactive, staid to lively, and singular to social" (6).

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