

New Roles of Liaison Librarians: A Liaison's Perspective

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Librarians as Middleware

Liaison librarians have always been connectors between their patrons and the information that is collected in libraries. However, this role as connector, or middleware as it was termed by Rick Luce at the 2008 ARL and CNI Fall Forum, has taken on new twists for liaison librarians today, or liaison 2.0 as I have come to think of us. Liaison 2.0 represents more than a simple refinement of liaison librarianship; it represents a significant rewrite of the basic skills and services typically associated with liaison librarianship. As we move further and further into the age of Google, where faculty and administrators feel that all information is online and easily located, it is increasingly important that liaison librarians use the relationships that they have built to connect the library's work to the academic mission of their university. This role as middleware is core to the liaison 2.0. Building relationships is becoming the essence of what it is to be a liaison librarian—one that connects users with their information needs, whatever the format and whatever the technology. The role of librarians as middleware is the real brains behind the traditional roles for liaison 2.0, and, if this connection works well, all the rest will be informed by it and flow from it.

At New York University we have spent a significant amount of time in the past academic year thinking about science library services, and a large part of that work has included reexamining our roles as liaison librarians and how we might evolve to better serve the changing needs of our students and researchers. In the process I have formed a new appreciation of the concept of librarians as middleware, as well as roles we leave behind as we offer new services and acquire new skills.

2.0 Takes on Traditional Roles

I have been a liaison for my entire nine-year career as a librarian, and my responsibilities have always been divided into what one colleague refers to as the “holy trinity” of liaison librarianship: reference, instruction, and collection development. I have seen each element of the trinity reconstructed in the past decade. Newer virtual reference services are transforming the ways in which librarians reach out to their patrons—and, more importantly, the ways in which their patrons communicate with them. This change has been so striking that

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many libraries, including my own science reference center, are doing away with their traditional reference desks in favor of virtual service.

Additionally, we have noted in science reference services at NYU that we are seeing an increase in in-depth, sometimes in-office, reference consultations

even though our science reference desk statistics are trending downward. Such consultations provide a cornerstone for me as I actively build relationships with students, faculty, and researchers. Those relationships, created with thoughtful, targeted outreach programs, are at the core of our role as middleware and will be an increasingly important component of the work of liaison 2.0. For example, one outreach effort I created in our science reference center at NYU is a research salon held three times each semester. Each salon features a presentation of one graduate student’s or faculty member’s research, bringing together researchers from across the sciences. These salons allow those researchers to network in ways that might not otherwise be possible, and it allows our science librarians to interact face-to-face with researchers that they might not otherwise be reaching.

The second arm of the liaison holy trinity, instructional services, has also been transformed by liaison 2.0. “Course embedded librarians,” who provide course-integrated information literacy instruction are the new norm. For the better part of the last decade, liaison librarians have been reaching out to the faculty members to partner in teaching students in new ways. My own participation in instruction has grown from an introductory library tour in an undergraduate chemistry class to a course-integrated week of instruction culminating in the completion of an assignment that I designed.

What do these trends mean for liaison librarians? I now need robust continuing education to enhance the effectiveness of my teaching and expose me to smart instructional design techniques. I need to hone my skills in developing

achievable learning outcomes and in assessing those outcomes, and I need to understand what I can accomplish using online tutorials, podcasts, and research guides and what I cannot. And, perhaps most importantly, I need to leverage my role as middleware to build the relationships necessary for the kinds of teaching partnerships with my faculty that allow me this place in their classrooms.

The third arm of this holy trinity is collection development. While I have always been supported by a robust approval plan in my book collecting, I also have always supplemented that plan by firm ordering titles not automatically selected by my approval plan. However, a few of my fellow science librarians have moved to on-demand purchasing as their only firm ordering and are focusing their attentions on other services. Other non-science librarians have expressed the need for redirecting their collection development efforts to "medium rare" items and "new media" that require the subject expertise of a liaison librarian to identify and collect. What does it mean for liaisons to focus on new kinds of library collections? Without careful planning for the future, it could mean research collections that are less abundant for tomorrow's researchers. However, our role as middleware can come into play here as well. Cultivation of relationships with faculty members and their graduate students aid us in creating the appropriate approval parameters as well as in focusing our medium rare and new media collections. Liaison 2.0 must also carefully consider how we manage on a large-scale the collection and preservation of new media and medium rare materials. Significant changes to current workflows across our libraries will be required for liaison librarians to make such a shift.

Beta Testing Liaison 2.0 Services

Like many liaison librarians, I confront the challenge of functioning in the "2.0 mode" while continuing to provide all the services I have in the past. Some things cannot be carried over into the new version. But just what those things are, is still up for debate. Many libraries, including my own, are giving up multi-desk reference service. Some libraries are giving up firm ordering as we have known it. I think the functions and services that are superseded are unique to each research library. Grounded in the academic mission of the research institution and the strategic plan of that library, liaison librarians and library leaders will chart the course that fits their organization's specific needs. However, one thing is quite clear: what remains core is our role as middleware. All emerging 2.0 liaison services grow from that role, and, if we sacrifice that, we

are ultimately sacrificing our effectiveness. We as liaisons must consider what partnerships we need to build, what skills are central to the 2.0 role, and how we can create more flexibility in our positions. We do not have to do it all or be it all, we just need to form the bridge between our patrons and their information needs, whatever new flavors those may come in in the twenty-first century library.

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