

## **The Subject Librarian's Role in Building Digital Collections: Where Information Management and Subject Expertise Meet**

Ruth Vondracek, Head of Reference & Instruction, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon

### **Introduction**

As library staff becomes more involved in building digital collections from local information holdings, they are finding that establishing cross-functional workgroups is critical to success. This presentation defines configuration of roles, expertise, and skill sets needed in these workgroups. The primary focus of the presentation is on the subject librarians' role in these efforts. "Subject librarians" refers to subject bibliographers, archivists, reference and collection development librarians, as well as other librarians with subject expertise. The title of the positions is not as important as the associated expertise; the key expertise being in-depth knowledge of a subject area and grounding in the principles of library use and organization. .

### **Use of Cross-Departmental Workgroups**

The initial development of digital collections in many organizations begins with the efforts of a project workgroup. Mainstreaming into the general workflow often occurs later, once the project group has worked out the resources and processes required. The configuration of these workgroups generally includes an outside subject specialist, such as academic faculty or researchers, a subject librarian, a systems specialist, a technical support person, a metadata specialist or cataloger, a copyright and licensing expert, and an information architect to guide web structure and interface design. All of these skill sets seldom reside in one department or individual, which is why cross-departmental collaboration is imperative. The leader of the workgroup should be chosen for his/her project management skills and overall understanding of the process rather than for his/her expertise in a specific area.

### **Subject Librarians Role**

Working on cross-functional groups is a natural extension of the existing responsibilities of most subject librarians. At Oregon State University (OSU) for example, the subject librarians are responsible for third tier reference service, instruction, and collection development in their specific subject area. Because of their responsibilities they form close working relationships with outside subject specialists and can facilitate interdepartmental communications. These liaison relationships are key to identifying potential collections for digitization and to establishing the trust that is needed in cross-departmental cooperation.

Involvement with academic departments increases subject librarians awareness of ongoing research and related information repositories. They also understand how that information is used and are able to assess its value and how it complements the existing

body of knowledge and relates to other library collections. In order to build useful collections, librarians need to be prepared to actively seek out the information that may be stored elsewhere.

As subject librarians they can assist the metadata specialist or cataloger by identifying existing thesauri or controlled vocabulary to adequately describe the materials. They can also coordinate meetings with the subject and metadata specialists to verify the accuracy of the vocabulary within their subject area.

As advocates for the end-user, subject librarians coordinate with the systems, technical support, and information architects to ensure that the access software and interface design are optimized for easy data retrieval. Since they are in a position to understand the needs of both the project designers and the end users, they can assist with usability studies to test the success of the design.

### **Training and Development**

Most subject librarians already possess the underlying skill set needed to work on cross-functional workgroups. The role of subject librarian requires highly developed communication and negotiation skills. Ongoing training in this area is recommended. Taking courses on improving consulting skills are useful because they focus on how to communicate and listen effectively; how to negotiate; and how to clarify goals.

While subject librarians are familiar with the use of controlled vocabularies and retrieval systems, it would be beneficial for them to understand in greater detail how to classify materials. Also necessary is an understanding of information structure and search mechanisms affect retrieval results. The ability to assess in a measurable way what works and what doesn't work for users is also critical. Basic metadata and cataloging courses are good avenues to gain these skills. Courses about information architecture often provide a solid introduction to the concepts of information structure and design.

Not just one individual, may be team of people working together. Mainstreamed.

Continuum of building digital library collections, subject librarians influence the process at several points.

1. Resource Discovery or Selection – as liaisons to various departments and to other institutions subject librarians are in a position to seek out or identify existing or potential information stores that may lend themselves to digital collections
  1. includes reviewing appropriateness of material to existing collections or as enhancements or extensions of collections.
  2. Also looking for 'fit' in terms of library & university mission
2. Initial point of contact for negotiations between library and other departments/organizations, (subject experts) go-between, holds responsibility of communicating in both directions – informing library of importance in particular discipline, explaining to department willingness of library to participate, defining library's potential role (which has of course, been discussed internally)

3. Working with tech services staff to identify appropriate thesauri, controlled vocabularies, appropriateness of terms, suggest subject experts as contacts,
4. building contextual or identifying contacts for building contextual information, may help research other related collections or resources, create webliographies
5. identifying ways to incorporate into library instruction or to facilitate teachers/instructors use, by working to create appropriate curriculum guides.
6. ensuring through discussion with tech / vendors that info infrastructure will support needed search retrieval characteristics
7. providing input to interface designer to provide best access to users.
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