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Editorial – Academic Librarians and Engaging with Scholarship

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Editorial – Academic Librarians and Engaging with Scholarship

The *New Review of Academic Librarianship* (NRAL) tries to be practitioner focussed in its outlook, and in order for this to work we need to ensure that we achieve regular and significant, high quality contributions from our practitioner academic librarian communities. I am pleased to say that this is not currently a problem for NRAL (although it used to be) and we do enjoy submissions from practicing librarians on a regular basis. Having been involved with NRAL for a number of years now as an editor and associate editor I recently found myself reflecting upon how practicing librarians take that first step into academic writing. How and why do librarians engage with their profession to the extent that they wish to conduct research and/or write about their practice in a way that appeals to both an academic and practitioner audience?

The 2018 themed issue of NRAL was about ‘the position of the academic library within the institution’ and there were many papers contained within which addressed some of the high profile activities and projects that libraries are engaged in, as well as articles about how the library is seen as progressive and innovative within its parent institution (Appleton, 2021). However, this has not always been the case, and there is an ongoing argument that because academic libraries are so good at operating with no fuss, and coping with unexpected events quietly and pragmatically, they can often be invisible to the senior leadership of their institutions. This is unfortunate because libraries, especially academic libraries, are very dynamic, innovative and creative organisations. Libraries manage some of the most sophisticated systems and relational databases and are hugely responsive to their customers, with quality assurance, performance measurement and continuing development and improvement embedded into their day to day operations. Similarly, libraries are often involved in pedagogic research and librarians themselves are now very well versed in being ‘evidence based’ in their decision making and planning. Yet because we, the academic library community, expect this to be the case there can often be a lack of visibility of what we do.

I would argue that as a profession and a sector, we should be incredibly proud of the work that we do as academic librarians, and one of the ways in which we can demonstrate this is through sharing what we do and deliberately drawing attention to our successes and achievements as well as any proactive research projects that we might conduct. This means effectively engaging with scholarly activity, through presenting at conferences and writing for publication. In doing so, individual academic librarians can raise the profile and visibility of themselves and their library service both within their organisation or parent institution, as well as externally.

I would suggest that the starting point for professional engagement (including with scholarship) is professional pride. You cannot genuinely be engaged if you are not proud of what you do and engaged with your job and your profession. Job satisfaction and fulfilment is essential in any profession or vocation. Esteem and self-actualisation

feature at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a psychological theory relevant as much to librarianship as to any other profession. Pride is a cornerstone of professional engagement. You can gain pride from any job done well, including jobs that you don't particularly like (e.g., cleaning the bathroom, home renovations, changing a flat tyre, etc.), but to truly and fully engage in a job, or a profession, you need to be proud to be part of it.

Professional engagement comes in a variety of formats, depending on how much time and energy you have, but it essentially comes down to how much you do outside of what is actually expected of you in your substantive role. This doesn't mean working extra hours, but it does involve how you operate within the time and space that you have in your workplace. For example, you might be involved in leading project work, or involved and particularly engaged with an internal committee or community of practice. Alternatively, you might be an active member of a professional association, or be someone who is regularly looking for a sponsor for your innovation or 'good idea'. There are many levels and forms of professional engagement and they all rely on librarians being passionate and interested in what they do and ultimately feeling and being 'proud' to be an academic librarian.

Once 'pride' is acknowledged attention can be turned to how to share your enthusiasm through celebrating your successes, and that is where scholarly engagement might be appropriate. These successes often come in the form of accomplished projects or innovations, or case studies of ways of working which can be regarded as good practice. There are several reasons why such achievements should be captured through some kind of scholarly output and these include: sharing good practice; time stamping your project or innovation and creating reference points; professional development; professional responsibility; wanting to give something back to the profession; continuing professional development.

Presenting your work at events is usually the first scholarly activity tried by the academic library practitioner/scholar and there are several opportunities for librarians to present. As a profession and a more specific (academic) sector there are numerous local, national and international conferences and events that librarians can get involved in. Some such networks and events are focussed on our academic library sector, whilst others cover more specific areas of librarianship (e.g., acquisitions, information and digital literacy, copyright, cataloguing and indexing, Open Access, etc.) There is a lot of choice available to the academic library community, including: conferences; seminars; workshops; colloquia; symposia, etc. Similarly, there are many different types of presentation formats including: full papers; short papers; workshop presentations; lightning talks; poster presentations, panel discussions, etc. Presenting and public speaking require specific skills and as such, are scholarly activities which take time to perfect and excel at. There are resources available to help develop such skills, but from a scholarship perspective it is important that academic library practitioner/scholars engage in this.

The other main area of scholarship is of course writing for publication, which can often seem less daunting, but more time consuming than presenting at conferences. I would suggest that for an academic library practitioner, making their first move into scholarly professional engagement, publication can naturally follow on from having presented at a conference (indeed there might be an expectation for you to write up your paper for publication in the conference proceedings.)

In the same way that there are multiple opportunities for presenting, there are many different opportunities for academic writing and writing for publication. When

we talk about scholarly writing it is not just about academic writing, which needs to go through a rigorous peer review process. Peer review journals, such as NRAL, are just one channel available to practitioners. There are many others depending on the type of writing that you want to do, including:

- Blog post
- Book chapter
- Book review
- Conference proceedings
- Editorials
- Local case study
- Newsletter
- Peer review
- Professional press
- Project write-up
- Reflective journal
- Research paper

There are many resources available for librarians to support them in their academic writing, most. Of particular note are the ‘Academic Writing Librarians’ blog (Fallon, n.d.) and the guidelines for librarians and academic writing published by Brewerton (2010) and Coonan (2017) respectively. It is worth dwelling on this latter resource because within it, Coonan breaks down the craft of academic writing into a few really simple and manageable steps and helps makes sense of how we might structure our academic writing using her ‘The Thing Explainer’ tool:

- Here’s the thing I did and this is why it needed doing (Introduction)
- Here’s what other people said about this thing (and what they left out) (Literature review)
- Here’s how I did it (Methods)
- This is why I did it
- Here’s someone else doing it this way because that helped me see why it would work for my thing
- Here’s why doing it this way meant I’d be able to actually learn something from it
- Here’s how it might not have worked fully, all the same (Limitations)
- Oh, and this is why it’s OK to do it to humans (Ethical implications)
- Here’s what happened (Findings)
- This is what I think it means for what I started out wondering (Discussion)
- This is what it means for the rest of us and what we do (or know)
- Here’s what else we could do about this (Further research)

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge that becoming an academic librarian scholar is not always straight forward in that once you have harnessed your own engagement and enthusiasm you will also need time, support from your colleagues and support from your managers and it might be that you have to cope and commit whilst not having all these elements in place. However, I would argue that the main ingredient is ‘pride’ which manifests itself as enthusiasm and if you have this then you

are in a position to get started. Once you have started you may well gain the momentum required to keep on going, and it is this commitment to practitioner oriented and practitioner developed scholarship, which will keep the pages of NRAL informative, relevant and up to date for many years to come.

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