"We need to develop the capacity to think of a library as a developing enterprise rather than an established institution."
Joan Frye Williams at ALA 2014 “Libraries from Now On” Summit (paraphrase)

Our campus become a 1:1 iPad campus four years ago, and watching the transition’s impacts on student learning and the library has made Joan Frye Williams’ words resonate for me personally. Going through disruption in our own library just as I was writing this article made it clear to me how much we need to build better internal capacities and mindsets to support ourselves in times of change. Both schools and libraries need to begin thinking of themselves as fluid enterprises, not fixed monoliths. Ultimately, we need to be sure that our deep love affair with libraries centers around our deep love for students and their learning. We can serve our communities and student learning best if we are tracking, aware of, and acting on trends to which our schools and libraries need to be responsive.

The Ten Years from Now Game
My stepdaughter played a game with me recently called Ten Years. To play, you introduce yourself ten years ago, and then ten years into the future. If you imagine a library ten years ago, and then ten years from now, the rapid rate of change we are grappling with becomes clear. Ten years from now, who knows—perhaps the library will be the only physical part of a public school still standing, serving as the clearing house for the delivery of virtual services to students and the face-to-face gathering point and resource for a community that learns virtually.

It’s clear that digitization is rapidly changing our culture in ways that will take us time to understand. Five years ago, iPads didn’t exist, for example. Today, every student in my district has one issued by the school. A decade ago, smartphones were virtually nonexistent. Now our lives and our students’ lives are interwoven with technology. Mobile device use is on the rise and, for the first time over
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51% of time spent online is now on mobile devices (http://www.kpcb.com/blog/2015-internet-trends).

Granted, many schools still teach as if this is not the case, but as mobile devices and now wearable technologies become more and more prolific we will have to adapt to the fact that our students live in a networked world. That means, in the future, the ability to search will become an even more vital capacity we need to build in our students. The best searchers will get the “wins” so to speak. Current library strategies around this can be very hit or miss, and something as a profession we need to work on.

We also know that there has been a paradigm shift from students as consumers to producers, and we see that shift reflected in society at large as well. Individual student voices can be empowered through all sorts of channels from YouTube to Instagram to Twitter and more—a student who is an expert on anything can become a social media celebrity, or engage in conversations with experts, celebrities, NASA, or the top skateboarder in the country, as my nephew does. As John Seely Brown explained in his presentation at the Aspen Institute’s Dialogue on Public Libraries, students are moving from “I am what I wear/own/control” to “I am what I create, share, and others build on.” Brown reminds us that learning is becoming more socially constructed through a variety of media, encounters, places, and platforms. Learning through peers is becoming more paramount—a factor my youngest nephew reminded me of when showing me his “YouTube celebrities,” who turned out to be elementary school Minecraft experts. The thrill of encountering others who share their interests is a potent and powerful one for our students, and the channels through which they can build knowledge together are deepening.

Personalized Learning

Obviously technology also allows learning to be more easily personalized and “just in time” via media like the Khan Academy, YouTube, MOOCs, etc. How many of us have taught ourselves something we needed to learn via YouTube in the last year? Millennials (and their parents) are also increasingly expecting institutions to respond to them in a more personalized way, according to trends identified by KPCB. This trend towards personalization is only likely to deepen as technology becomes more ubiquitous, cheaper, and more of an expected norm. But personalization isn’t just about the technology—it is about experiences. Students aren’t using technology in isolation—the human element and the connections they make through the technology are a significant part of their experience and will continue to be going forward.

Old tech trends are also likely to find a second life and surface in new formats. Second Life, which had an educational heyday several years ago, is likely to resurface in another form as a personalized virtual learning platform. At the SXSWedu 2015 conference, Maya Georgeiva of the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning wondered about the future of immersive foreign language environments, for example. And obviously wearable technologies will continue evolving into something more user friendly, more “native” feeling, and becoming another avenue for participating with knowledge and information.

All of these changes create stressors in our educational institutions as well. At the “Libraries From Now On Summit,” Thomas Frey of the Da Vinci Institute wondered about who will say what credentialing requirements will be. Dr. Renu Khator, president of the University of Houston, who also spoke at the Forum, posited a trend towards tailor-made learning for students, with the possibilities that professors will be unlinked from any particular university, creating perhaps what Spotswood (New Jersey) School District’s Eric Sheninger calls a “free range” learning environment for students.

What does this mean for our schools, our students, and our libraries, besides massive change in what our institutions will eventually be? If author Thomas Friedman is right when he says our students will be living in a 401K world where they will function more as “free range” employees and have far more options that they need to be informed about, then the need for an educational system that is responsive to that world is critical. We need the ability to be flexible, make changes, rethink structures and policies, and we’re going to need to do it more quickly. It is also likely that future “free range” employees will be less likely to be responsive to top-down management styles, and more interested in distributed leadership—in fact, employers are already seeing that. So how can we accommodate more rapid changes in what our libraries are, and in management styles of our institutions?

The “Free Range” Library

School libraries are uniquely positioned in this individualized, on-demand, technology-driven, creative environment to lead their campuses forward, as they are the original self-paced, self-motivated, interest-guided enclaves on a campus. School libraries have always been institutions where students had choices—how to spend their time, what to read, what to research, how to work, what to create. But clearly, learning how to incorporate student voices more into the decisions of the library and having policies and schedules that allow libraries to be

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“free range” learning spaces are important going forward.

The language we use reflects the paradigm shifts we need to make. As Frey identified at the ALA summit, we need to think of libraries as “gateways” instead of “gatekeepers.” John Szabo, in “Rising to the Challenge” (Aspen Institute 2014) reminds us that “we can’t just be providing space... we are a learning institution, not just an access institution.” Joan Frye Williams wanted us to remember that libraries are about abundance. It’s not about what the materials and resources are—it’s that libraries are places where our students can encounter an abundance of ideas and resources. How can we cultivate policies and spaces geared towards abundance? How can libraries support/ enhance independent study, mentorship programs, genius hour time, or passion projects? We have to keep pushing against the idea of libraries as warehouses and transform them into “idea houses.”

“Rising to the Challenge”

At the Texas Library Association conference (2015), Amy Garmer shared the recent work of the Aspen Institute, which led a multi-year effort on re-envisioning public libraries. In their publication, “Rising to the Challenge” the Institute identified three key assets of libraries: people, place, and platform. How do we become responsive to our learners, create a sense of place for our school community, and build learning platforms online that are responsive to the needs of our learners?

When I think of my own library services, the virtual learning environment is the area that needs the most attention. With 1:1, the first motivation of students isn’t going to the library website, but if we make our library websites professional hubs for information—and like a physical learning commons, gathering together all sorts of “need to know” information for students—we create a more vital resource for students. Perhaps, for example, the counseling, technology, and library departments should combine efforts to create some one-stop shopping for student learners at the high school level? Maybe our websites need to be more dynamic, like blogs, with articles of interest to students or highlighting student projects, images, and work? As our schools become more device bound, creating deep, resource-rich, but also “student-oriented” online spaces, rather than “librarian-oriented” ones, will be increasingly important to supporting our students well.

Another obvious trend is towards a more global concept of schooling and work. How can we make our schools more globally connected? Skyping in an author, doing a Google hangout with an expert—through our own connections we can help students connect more internationally. This, of course, requires us to build our own connections and find ways to network—locally through our own communities but also globally through social media, blogs, or services like Skype an Author Network. Can we, as some public libraries have done, build a “library” of experts for students to borrow/check out or mentor with? The Aspen Institute report suggests that perhaps libraries should start scaling their efforts more globally or nationally for economies of scale.

Most significantly, how can we embrace this notion of libraries as developing enterprises, not static institutions? This is the most difficult paradigm shift of all. Even the most aware of us can be caught off guard by our own resistance to rethinking what libraries are or can be. Mark Ray, Director of Instructional Technology and Library Services at Vancouver Public Schools, taught me the term “chopportunity”—a challenge turned into an opportunity. We have real “chopportunities” to provide leadership in our schools by understanding these trends. Two excellent resources to help are the ALA’s new Center for the Future of Libraries’ trend reports (http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends) and the Aspen Institute’s “Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries” report (http://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/documents/AspenLibrariesReport.pdf). It’s easy to talk about these trends, but it’s much harder to take action around them. But for libraries, which are constantly misunderstood, it’s imperative that we respond to changes and start speeding up our efforts to do so. Our students deserve environments that support them as globally connected, “free range,” flexible and self-motivated learners. As we play the Ten Years from Now game, we have the power to create the future. And it’s time to get started.

Works Cited


