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Collaboration Is the New Black

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Collaboration is the New Black

Orange may be the new black, but as I have seen only five minutes of that show, I can't really use it here. Besides, based on the five minutes I saw, I would assume it is a series written by males. Not since the Victoria's Secret catalog have I seen so many women wearing fewer clothes, or engaging in so many unmentionable acts. I'll stop there because my Victorianism is showing, I'm sure.

Collaboration for libraries may well be the new black but for a serious problem. To say that implies that collaboration is a new thing in libraries when it is as old as Callimachus himself. Libraries have always been about collaboration. It's just like everything else we do, we keep it as quiet as our buildings.

Some critics of the stodgy library stereotype have jumped on this as if collaboration were a new thing when it is a very old thing. That first library brought together "books" from everywhere in an effort to bring people together from wherever they were. The idea of a library, like the idea of a university, was to help people put their heads together. Libraries did this with books first, then with journals, and now with just about everything else you can think of.

We're now collaborating about data and even talking about aggregating it to see if it will tell us a new thing. But therein is the problem. Because it is so big, it's hard to analyze; and like any gargantuan thing, its size is almost all you can talk about. In fact, you hear a great deal about "big data" (not the band but actual data), yet no one really seems to know much else to say about it other than it is big, and there's no good way to get your arms around it. But if we ever can it will tell us the secrets of the universe.

Big data, like all other buzz words that you can think of is really dangerous in isolation. If analyzed properly, it may be able to tell us something useful but until we get a better grip on it, we're better off focusing on what we have at hand (i.e. the local collection). I won't say that big data is a fad, but I will say it reminds one of a missing chapter in a book. You can make great claims about it so long as it never shows up. If we can get a handle on it, it will doubtless lead to better and more expansive collaboration. A useful preliminary on big data is found here (http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/big_data; a contrary one, here <http://timharford.com/2014/04/big-data-are-we-making-a-big-mistake/>. And finally, one that makes many of the points I make here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/03/upshot/a-25-question-twitter-quiz-to-predict-retweets.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&r=0>.

What is more important than big or little data is the collaboration of the library with the faculty, and area libraries with one another. Again, not a new thing but an old thing with new power. With software like BePress's Digital Commons, it's becoming much easier to connect the library with the faculty, faculty with one another, students with each other, and students with faculty. Once these are in place, the library, which should be at the forefront of this collaboration, can extend that sharing to libraries in the region. If enough of this takes place, we may be able to save open access after all.

Meanwhile, libraries are collaborating more with area libraries, and using consortium in the area to expand that collaborative prospect. While consortia have always made it easy to share costs, some are looking at sharing collections and even staffs when geographical propinquity allows. Public and academic collaborations, now more than a decade old, have caught on in other countries but more slowly here in the U.S.

Libraries are also looking more carefully at collaborative space sharing, combining the library with other academic spaces on campus. New library buildings, if they are being built at

all, often include shared spaces with IT, writing labs, technology rooms and so on. Again, not any of these things are new, but they are getting new looks as universities work hard to get better returns on investment.

Collaborating is also beginning to take place even within the library, but this may be the most difficult of all collaborations to effect. For most of my career, libraries were thought of in terms of public and technical services. Sometimes archives were added to the mix. Today, however, more and more libraries are breaking down these barriers and removing the divisions. Acquisitions units are taking over more of copy cataloging while cataloging proper is headed toward more original cataloging endemic to that library. Public services personnel are no longer tied to the reference desk (if it still exists), but expanding their roles into on-campus labs, dormitories, and faculty classrooms.

Less common but not unheard of are makerspaces (or fablabs, hackerspaces) in academic libraries. These are places where anyone can come in and with others try out new things using tools, software, networks, technologies--you name it--to create whatever it is they wish to create. In any event, it is a place where collaboration can take place.

None of these collaborations take place by themselves. They require good leadership and someone willing to push them forward over the rough spots. It's easy to make a mess of them, hard to make them successful. As mentioned above, making collaboration take place *in* the library is often the most difficult of all because so many of the people working there have been there for decades. Making these collaborations work means asking them to do something completely different from what they have been doing for years. Most will adapt to the changes but need to be ushered into them.

I don't know about orange being the new black. I would hate to think that what I saw in the five minutes of the show I watched will soon become the norm! But collaboration, as far as libraries go, really is the new black for them. It will soon be as commonplace as p-slips once were.

Let's embrace it while we can.