Boundary Reflections: Holding in or Holding Back?

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ALL President Steve Anderson's 2014 theme “Beyond Boundaries” arrived before I'd had the chance to pick up my dry cleaning from the 2013 AALL Annual Meeting and long before I'd finished sending follow-up notes and emails to colleagues I met or reconnected with in Seattle.

I like to “noodle” ideas, so I didn't mind getting a heads up of the theme so I could start planning a conference program submission. In mulling possible programs, my thoughts kept returning to the concept of “boundary.” Questions such as: is it a boundary? and Who or what creates a boundary? occupied my thoughts. I concluded that a boundary serves two functions. It stifles, suppresses, and holds us back, while also serving as a shield to protect us from whatever lies beyond. What are the boundaries that we, as librarians, see at the edges of our job descriptions? What new, interesting, and unknown opportunities will come rushing in when we push past the boundaries of our known sphere? Are we too comfortable with the “known”? And is it the unknown that encourages us to cling to what we know best, despite acknowledging that our continued relevance demands that we innovate, reenvision, and fearlessly move beyond the familiar?

But how do we go about this? Clearly, professional innovation, change, and reinvention take time beyond that required to simply get the day's work done. In Reframing Academic Leadership, Lee Bolman and John Deal refer to Warren Bennis' "First Law of Academic Pseudodynamics: "routine work drives out nonroutine work and smothers to death all creative planning, all fundamental change in the university.""

With the goal of being more creative in my librarianship and motivated by President Anderson's theme, I decided to undertake a year-long examination of my work to understand the “what” or “who” that limits that which I want my staff and me to accomplish—and additionally, to understand how to move beyond these limits to advance the law library and the law school.

Ruminating over Anderson's theme was the jumpstart I needed to move forward on the list of processes and services I had already identified for reexamination. If you need a place to start, take last year's annual review. Did you get a compliment because you delivered a book or an in-depth research report that not only answered the question posed but also anticipated the next round of research needs? Focus on the institution's priorities when examining your work, and ask if what you are doing is what you should be doing. In other words, don't ask how you can better deliver the book. Rather, ask if supplying a book is in fact the best way of delivering the service you delivered.

I began by reading Charles Duhigg's The Power of Habit. His work reinforces the idea that change requires scheduled time for reflection and planning. Failure to schedule this “reflection time” leads to a continuation of routine because it is preprogrammed into our thinking. We need to break out of our professional habits in order to affect change. To break a professional habit requires assessing why and how the work is being done, whether it should continue to be done, how to do it better, or how to replace it with a more relevant service. I've found that evaluating even a routine task in access services takes an inordinate amount of time. The non-routine time this kind of activity requires is hard to find if it isn't calendared.

One colleague generously shared how they schedule reflection time. One doesn't open email after 2 p.m. on Fridays, the thought being that a “real” crisis would come via phone or in person and that whatever comes in after 2 p.m. can likely wait until Monday. Another colleague schedules an out-of-office lunch—she takes her lunch and hides out in the undergraduate library for two hours of undisturbed reflection time. She is hoping to make it a bi-weekly affair! Another told me he shuts his office door late on Fridays, pours a glass of bourbon, and contemplates where to take his library. She is hoping to make it a bi-weekly affair! Another told me he shuts his office door late on Fridays, pours a glass of bourbon, and contemplates where to take his library.

But you need to find what works for you.

If my personal correspondence is any guide, we seem willing to find these times for reflection and growth in our personal lives. Emails from friends and colleagues are filled with descriptions of renaissance activities, including first attempts at step dancing, watercolor painting, kitchen fires and failures, language classes, Doctors and Dentists Without Borders, master gardening, fly fishing, kayaking, and, in some cases, fly fishing from kayaks. Surely our professional lives are likewise entitled to renaissance time to reflect, plan, and experiment as we work to move beyond organizational and institutional boundaries in our quest to redefine law librarians and law libraries. Let's use this year to explore, both personally and together, how we as law librarians can find this time and use it creatively to see what new, interesting, and unknown opportunities lay out there beyond our comfort zones.

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