

Kansas Library Association College and University Libraries Section Proceedings

Volume 13
Number 1 *Connections Beyond Collections*

Article 3

2023

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Recommended Citation

Creed-Dikeogu, Gloria F. (2023) "Library Transformation: The Futures School Experience Applied to Practice," *Kansas Library Association College and University Libraries Section Proceedings*: Vol. 13: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2160-942X.1089>

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Library Transformation: The Futures School Experience Applied to Practice

Abstract

Attendance as a member of the Plains Cohort at a three-day Futures Foundations in Natural Foresight Workshop taught by the Kedge Futures School (TFSX), provided the researcher with the opportunity to explore the theoretical ropes of library futurism alongside the natural foresight framework and the many futurist tools, like futures wheels and scenario building, that are so vital when participating in library futures strategic planning. This paper explains trend patterns and analyses and the importance of sensemaking to futures scenarios creation and how each connects to library transformation.

Keywords

Strategic Planning, Library Futures, Natural Foresight Framework, Library Transformation

Library Transformation: The Futures School Experience Applied to Practice

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Attending Kedge Futures School (TFS)

Library Futurism has always been of personal interest, particularly after participating in several leadership training opportunities. As a result, acceptance was received to attend a three-day *Futures Foundations in Natural Foresight* taught by leaders from the *Kedge Futures School (TFSX)*. The Plains Cohort Workshop was held online from March 7-9, 2023, and sponsored by an IMLS Grant administered by the Connecticut State Library Association. Librarians from various types of libraries attended cross-country cohorts in 2022-23, completing pre-work and futurist readings online. They learned to use an online Mural platform chosen for shared individual introductions and group work assignments, prior to the course. The course was organized into three large groups that interacted virtually and connected on the Mural platform for all assignments. These groups were periodically diminished for additional discussion, but worked together to build abundant, macro and fortress world scenarios throughout the course.

Kedge Futures School Workshop Aims/Objectives

The aim of the workshop was to teach librarians from various library settings to understand futurism and use this knowledge to bolster their library work through collaborative interaction. They learned to work with staff at a distance and participate in effective teamwork with those with an avid passion for challenging the status quo.

Library futures is not about what the library will look like in the future. Instead, it is about what is happening now in libraries. What might inform future library developments and improvements. How librarians could meld that knowledge with their leadership skillsets and understanding of futures foresight frameworks to build a multitude of library transformation scenarios that would better meet user need.

Using Natural Foresight Frameworks

The natural foresight framework defined as “the ability to anticipate what is needed” (Mathews, 2014, p.2.) as taught by TFSX created “multiple future library scenarios, envisioning outcomes and evaluating current and pending strategies to support library decision making and action in the present against a suite of possible futures” (Spencer & Monero Salvatico, 2013). The natural foresight framework teaches participants that leaders wishing for successful libraries in a rapidly changing 21st century environment must consciously “avoid tunnel vision” and keep their agile minds “open to many alternative futures” (Mathews, 2014, p.2). They must embrace new pathways to the future, while fostering new mindsets and skills for staff, thereby aiding libraries to seize and take advantage of untapped possibilities and opportunities that exist. Library leaders must be open to training and retraining their staff to acquire skills that fit into “a world that is being rapidly shaped by networked artificial intelligence and digital lifestyles” (Spencer & Montero, 2013, p. 128). As a result, these leaders must also be open and willing to change their perspectives, and reframe their outdated mindsets, while encouraging, and supporting library staff to learn, relearn and unlearn skillsets to overcome educated incapacity.

Librarians as futurists must also learn to harness world trends research, so they can begin to develop thought strategies around futures scenario planning approaches. These might aid them to think out of the box and “reflect on where” and how their libraries “fit into a variety of information rich worlds” (Mathews, 2014, p.3.) and how best they can work to solve

library-related problems requiring a futurist bent. That way, they are pulled rather than pushed into library futures that are malleable and transformational. As participants of strategic planning, they can then explore their own biases, discover, and learn more tools that can be used for mapping out, creating, and redefining library futures.

Trend theory and futurism

The world of the 21st century is a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous one, where the application of natural foresight allows leaders to create “new vistas for the future” (Spencer & Montero Salvatico, 2018). The natural foresight model is an organic process that is not just a series of steps we can apply, but it helps leaders through discovery, to uncover their biases, and learn to challenge those by effecting library change. Through a process of exploration, trends that affect the library community are examined, and leaders come to understand how those collide, can be applied across environments, and can move leaders toward sense-making, when complex situations or problems are encountered and need to be resolved, so that better decisions can be made.

Demographics analyses are commonly utilized when considering library futures. These demographics (e.g., social, population) are used to determine what is coming, how the library might be impacted in the process, how best to effect needed changes and how they might evolve these issues. These tools might be used when planning for a new library building or even when considering what programming should be provided to library patrons.

Librarians learned the import of researching and staying informed about scientific and technological breakthroughs, social and political undercurrents, and new literacies that might indirectly affect libraries and that could directly “cause disruptive change” to occur in social, political, economic, and educational settings. However, when trained to utilize natural foresight frameworks for futures planning, librarians might yet be armed to better “anticipate looming risks and potential opportunities” in the future (Matthews, 2014, p.6). Librarians were encouraged to scan topical local and international news reports daily to stay on track with social, economic, and political changes that might affect their work processes and decision-making affecting the future.

Spencer & Montero Salvatico (2013) suggests that we go further, “in our era of accelerating volatility” beyond our close study of trends, to “transition to” the employment of “new practices” that are focused on “what is changing, what is emerging and what is possible...to recognize a new world of guiding narratives driven by values, implications, systems design, and aspirations” thrusting libraries into “the next wave of the future” (p. 3-5). When we can identify the values that are most important to our library communities, we can then participate in the strategic planning necessary to “map out the near and far ramifications of our decisions and ideas”. But in doing so, we must also realize that the trends that we embrace never exist in isolation, instead they collide, “mesh and interact with one another...and we must make sense of these patterns that are forming...to inform change” (Spencer, 2013, p. 3-6). Spencer (2013) also points out that “thinking about the future without action has little value” and that “we must be able to actuate our futures, leveraging the knowledge developed through trends, values, implications and systems” for us to act and in so doing, “hijack alternative landscapes and pull ourselves toward where we want to be” (p.7) to effect transformational change in libraries.

Applying futurist tools to practice

During the workshop, participants were introduced to a variety of tools that could be utilized to build futurist models which included: trend cards, causal layered analysis, probability matrices, and ladders of inference. Trend cards can be used with colleagues as discussion starters about future change and library planning. Causal layered analysis is used in complex problem-solving, analyzing either solution, responsibility, or source, so that clarity about the systemic causes of a problem is

gained, while matrices may be used for statistical library research problem-solving. Although ideas were offered about how specific tools might be used, practical implementations and examples were not provided.

Workshop groups spent their time on Mural learning how to use futures wheels and build three different futures scenarios, using specific narratives that were crafted by presenters for discussion. They worked together to plan, develop and implement three types of scenarios: abundant (a world that has been shaped by positive, wholistic business, policy and educational changes), macro (the world Now, with its haves and have-nots, its globalization, megacities and cloud technologies) and fortress (a world in 2035, changed to become a landscape of scarcity, oppression and interworld government, where the digital revolution and open Internet ended, and fear encompassed personal and organizational security). Each group constructed a futures wheel using brainstorming and trend analysis prior to constructing their scenarios. Groups looked for patterns to help them to make sense of how to understand the world they were working on and how best to lay the foundations for scenario creation in each world. Learning how to use the power of story by telling library narratives in scenario building was considered central as a futurist tool. "Narrative transformation" through stories was viewed as "a popular format" in which library "change management, culture assessment...shared ownership" and organization transformation efforts could be addressed. That way, through "expansive, divergent" strategy, creative ideas could be fostered driving library "story into new arenas of change" (Spencer & Montero Salvatico, 2015).

Trend pattern work and sensemaking were skills used alongside the futures wheel to lay the groundwork for each scenario. Groups used "pattern work" to create "mini scenarios" while also learning what went into the process of "pressure testing their decision making" as they built them. When utilizing pattern making, three levels of futures wheels were built by each group through brainstorming. Each level provided multiple options that "represented different scenario worlds" allowing groups to "identify the short, mid and long-range impacts and implications" pertaining to each given scenario. Groups navigated probable scenario "twists, turns, opportunities and aspirations", so that in "understanding" these different library "landscapes" they had "the power to anticipate what would be next, what was "unfolding and what" was "waiting in the wings" so that creating these scenarios would be less daunting (The Futures School, TSFX, 2023).

The scenarios constructed by each group provided "provocative" library-specific story constructions "about present and future societies, cities, values, technologies, experiences, business models", and social, political, and economic situations. These included how library stakeholders might react and what libraries could do to transform themselves, by making the best of each world. The narratives created by the three groups presented "a positive operating environment" for libraries, a second focusing its narrative on today's environment and a third focusing on the design of a thought-provoking oppressive future library scenario in 2035 that would emphasize the need for library leaders to focus on crafting resilient strategies that would bolster library offerings to stakeholders (The Futures School, TSFX, 2023).

Scenario Planning in library work

Scenario planning is commonly used by academic libraries, according to Ludwig, Glesecke & Walton (2010) to "redesign strategic plans" and address how librarians would fit into future role-situations (Para 7, 9) and impact library "values, staffing, resources...and changes in key partnerships". They are "useful" when library leaders think "about probable" library futures solutions that might answer questions like, "How do we change to be successful in these new worlds?" (Ludwig, Glesecke & Walton 2010).

During futures training sessions, multiple library futures scenarios should be considered and mapped out, using a variety of scenario-creation tools, allowing leaders to opt for those that might best fit their comparative library setting. They must learn about all the futurist tools that are available to them, what to use, and what outcomes they plan to attain and why.

That way they understand where they are going and what data they must obtain through trends studies, tool implementation and data gathering. Then, using natural foresight strategy, leaders can work collaboratively with staff to create, define, refine, and redefine library strategic plans, guiding the process and directing the changes that are suggested so that it is fitting and appropriate for that specific institution. There will be situations where profound changes might “demand” that leader-transformers examine their biases and “let go of outdated mindsets and practices” to “adopt...novel ways of seeing, designing, and activating value” (Spencer & Montero Salvatico, 2018, p.129), and in those situations leaders must be completely open to considering and accepting change, when options are limited.

Library Transformation in Practice and library futures

Mohrman (1989) defines organizational change as “a lasting change in the character of an organization that significantly alters its performance” (p.2). In keeping with this definition pertaining to libraries, “library transformation” according to Fiels (2013) refers to “fundamental change in the very nature of what we do and how we do it”. This includes changes in library “communities, community relationships, user expectations and user services, collections, physical space, library workforce and library leadership” (p.6). Describing how library transformation might work or be implemented in an academic setting, Felix & Wirth Lorenzo’s (2019) slide presentation “Ten Steps to Library Transformation” provides leaders with a plan for “library transformation”, connecting directly to how work “futures” planning might be affected in practice.

Felix & Wirth Lorenzo (2019) suggest that when librarians plan to transform services and spaces, they follow a ten-step process to effect these changes. They should start by conducting internal/external research before establishing a future vision for transformational change. Planning should involve forecasting library needs, followed by the creation of a futures wish list where existing library services and staffing situations are clarified, prior to new service creations or partnerships planned to meet unfulfilled user or staff needs. Much thought and planning should go into the reorganization of library staffing, services, and spaces, so these are appropriately set up, and at the same time, the right services, service amounts and staffing to be provided are changed as needed. These changes can then be translated into phased implementation plans, based on library funding and coordination priorities. Once this is accomplished, planning must be created to implement pilot projects in areas in the library where novel ideas can be tested, risk can be mitigated, and projects can be evaluated prior to their final implementation. After pilot projects have been evaluated, redesign and redevelopment may be needed, so that viable service strategies can be implemented to align with staffing, work and library structural changes that might be needed in final implementation. These redesigned plans should ultimately connect to the library’s strategic plan, service philosophy and how staff will deliver services to users when library transformation comes to fruition.

Conclusion

When we talk of future library transformation, we need to consider what is currently happening in library settings across continents. Libraries everywhere are constantly changing and transforming to improve their offerings to better serve user needs. Academic Libraries must change and transform as the institutions they serve do. That transformation must be ongoing, or the library will miss out on remaining the central hub of the institution and face a dismal future of being left behind.

Academic Libraries must move toward transformational change because “the roles of institutions such as these...are evolving beyond being primarily about collecting, storing, and disseminating information”. They are shifting “towards becoming spaces of social learning and spaces where knowledge is created and shared”. In the Macro Scenario equated with libraries today, innovative new libraries combine their modern architectural designs with their novel community and collaborative approaches to library service delivery, within a fast-changing academic environment where emerging academic staff roles have evolved. Greater demands are placed on technological, interpersonal, IT and transferable skillset development, becoming

increasingly more complex daily, leading many new “challenges and opportunities” for librarians destined to shape and transform the libraries of the future, because they have no other alternative but to do so (Tait, Martzoukou & Reid, 2016).

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