Sydney Adams, Lisa Forrest, and Nancy Falciani-White

Creativity in the Library

Intentionality and the Art of Making Space

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series are proposed by the authors and they are given space to explore. This issue's conversation is about creativity. The authors demonstrate that creativity in the library is a need, not a luxury.—*Dustin Fife, Series Editor*

Nancy Falciani-White (NFW): I have been interested in creativity in academic libraries for the last several years. The definition of creativity that I like to use in my research is that creativity is "a new approach, idea, product, or solution that matters either to a single person or the community."[1] Many understand the library as a catalyst or as a place where ideas intersect for library users, but what about creativity for library employees? In the face of constant change, and some may say existential threat, is there room for creativity in academic libraries? Is this even something we should spend time thinking about?

Sydney Adams (SA): Nancy, you bring up a great point about the role of creativity in the face of constant change. Creativity is essential as academic libraries adapt to the changing landscape of higher education. In my role, I consider how our library can address these changes by partnering with our colleagues across campus. College students today face many unique challenges, and while it may not always be obvious, the library can play a role in addressing students' needs holistically by developing creative solutions with campus partners. In other words, ideating with colleagues across campus better enables us to think creatively.

Lisa Forrest (LF): Thanks, Nancy and Sydney. Thinking creatively about solutions to challenges is something that many people who work in libraries do very well. Looking back over the pandemic years, we didn't have a choice BUT to think in innovative, agile, and creative ways. I like to think that because of what we've been through as a library community, we're all more comfortable in gray zones and find it easier to think creatively. Many folks I know (like Sydney Adams!) who work in libraries are excellent at making creative connections between ideas and building new collaborations in the process. I know it doesn't come naturally to everyone, though. Creativity is a practice, it's a way of being in the world. Like learning any skill—guitar or yoga or cooking—you get good at where you direct your efforts. You grow at something when you carve out the space to do that thing.

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Creativity in the workplace is no different. Regardless of what shape it takes, creativity takes intentionality and practice. So, to answer your question, I think we HAVE to spend time supporting creativity in libraries. That means learning how to structure time and space (i.e., meetings!) to encourage creative idea building; it means building a culture of openness and feedback, where ideas can be freely tossed around to see where they land; it means learning how to thrive in gray zones; and it means being intentional about connecting seemingly disparate ideas.

NFW: I love that you both see creativity as important for academic libraries! You both mention some specific examples of how creativity can be developed and supported. Lisa, could you talk a little more about "gray zones"? What does that mean and why is it important to creativity?

LF: I think about the "gray zone" as the space between not knowing and knowing. These are zones of discomfort for many of us! But it's also the space where creativity can flourish if folks can harness that energy for creative good (and not panic). We have to call out those moments: "Hey, we don't know the answer and it feels uncomfortable right now . . . but let's be present with it, explore some unknowns, and create something better together" vs. "We don't know what the answer is, so let's hurry up and do something similar or safe and avoid discomfort." What are your experiences in gray zones?

SA: I appreciate your point, Lisa, about opportunities that arise during periods of uncertainty. Rather than viewing uncertainty as a barrier, we can reframe it as an opportunity to explore creative solutions. For me, it's essential to embrace curiosity when we might not have an immediate solution to a problem. When I'm in the brainstorming stage of program planning, I often ask myself how others might approach the need we want to address and how we can partner to address that need. Creativity can flourish when you're open to exploring solutions with others.

NFW: I feel like I spend a lot of time in gray zones. I have a vision of how I want the library on our campus to be viewed by students and faculty, how I want it to fit into the larger campus community (as you indicated earlier, Sydney, the relationships with campus partners are so important!), and the local community, which can include local public libraries, town historical societies, and businesses. But there isn't a clear roadmap for how to make that vision a reality.

SA: This is something I've experienced, too, Nancy. For me, that vision can even look slightly different depending on who I'm working with, which can quickly become overwhelming to juggle. In your experience, how do you navigate overwhelming feelings and transition to a more productive mindset?

NFW: I'm constantly thinking, problem-solving, looking for new ideas, and talking with library staff to try to gradually move the needle on that vision. I try to say yes to new ideas a lot, and I encourage staff and students to try new things to see how they go, call it a pilot or an experiment, whatever language you like. The important thing is to take risks. I look for ideas everywhere. There is a certain amount of creativity that comes from knowing a lot about a specific topic (like libraries or outreach or data visualization or AI), but a lot of what sparks creative ideas is the connection that emerges from seemingly unrelated things. Creativity thrives on novelty, surprise, the unexpected, and that's why working on diverse teams of people who have wide-ranging backgrounds and personal interests can be very valuable. I have found myself drawing on gaming, crafting, renovating a house, parenting, and

other experiences to shape programming ideas, renovation project planning, and outreach. Have either of you ever found your hobbies shaping your library work?

SA: My hobby is cooking; I enjoy browsing cookbooks and blogs for new recipes I can test at home. There's a culinary phrase, *mise en place*, or *everything in its place*, that I often apply to my work in the kitchen and the library. Before diving into a new recipe (or planning a program, for example), I try to consider everything I need to prepare ahead of time to set myself up for success. In the kitchen, this might look like dicing an onion before I begin preheating a skillet so the oil doesn't burn. That way, I can focus on the techniques that are new to me in the recipe rather than diverting my attention to things I already know how to do. In the library, it looks more like brainstorming about what I can take care of before exploring new programming opportunities. For example, I might consider questions such as what types of programs can our space accommodate, or where are there gaps in programming on our campus at large we can address?

LF: I'd say that my creative interests and practices have shaped my entire career! When I first became an academic librarian in 2004, I founded and led a poetry club called "The Rooftop Poetry Club," which met on the rooftop of the library in the warm months (and in the stacks when the cold weather hit). It was more than simply hosting poetry readings and art workshops–it was truly about connecting people, new ideas, and community resources. What started as a small group of poets grew into a vibrant community hub that gathered for almost a decade! What I learned in this process was the value of building relationships and crafting meaningful experiences that matter to our learners. It taught me that, in addition to being creative in our programming, we need to be consistently deliberate in making space for collaboration with our community partners. Like any creative practice, you have to carve out the time and space.

SA: I want to highlight your point about making space for creativity, Lisa. For many folks, carving out time amidst their daily workload may feel like a lot to take on. What advice do you all have for folks who feel like they're in a creative rut?

NFW: One of the biggest challenges I have in this area is pausing the "tyranny of the urgent" long enough to even think beyond the next thing on my to-do list. I find that I can get a bit addicted to checking things off my list, but that doesn't always mean that I'm making time for the important things, like allowing space to gather information from new and interesting sources, letting my mind wander, or actually engaging in creative thinking or making. Being creative doesn't have to be big to be meaningful. It doesn't have to mean renovations, new programs, or reimagining existing partnerships. It could be noticing an issue with your workflow and thinking to yourself, "Huh, I bet there's a way to do that better," or getting feedback from a student in an information literacy one-shot that sends you back to colleagues with questions about website design or settings in your discovery layer.

I have also found it helpful to schedule time on my calendar for things I particularly want to get done. Setting aside any amount of time that is dedicated to a creative priority not only helps me feel like I have a little more control over my time, but it also ensures that I practice creativity regularly. The more you engage with creativity the more it becomes a mindset for you as a person, and the larger role it can play in the culture of the library.

LF: I hear that it can be challenging to harness creativity amidst day-to-day stressors. Just remember that carving out time to nurture creativity doesn't mean Plein-air painting over your lunch break–it can be as simple as giving yourself whiteboard space to *reimagine*

a better way to complete a daily task. It helps to know what inspires you and look for ways you can naturally fold creative inspiration into your day-to-day life. I recently watched the Fred Rogers documentary, and I was struck by how he aligned his values with his creativity and work. In the film, Rogers shares that "what we see and hear on the screen is part of who we become."[2] Just watching the film has made me more mindful of what I'm taking in from the world—and how that input influences my creative spirit and ultimately how I show up to everything, every day. ✀

Notes

1. Beth A. Hennessey and Teresa M. Amabile, "Creativity," *Annual Review of Psychology* 61, no. 1 (2010): 572, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.093008.100416.

2. Morgan Neville, director, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Tremolo Productions, Impact Partners, Independent Lens, 2018, 1 hr., 33 min., https://www.focusfeatures.com/wont-you-be-my-neighbor/.