Collaborative Librarianship

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An Iconoclast's View of Collaboration

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Abstract

Collaborative Librarianship has an impressive Advisory Board, none more so than the brilliant, original, and always challenging Stephen Abram. Abram has a long and distinguished career as illustrated by the biography below, but it isn't just his achievements that set Abram apart. He is a strong supporter of library cooperation and rethinking our profession. He is also fearlessness in confronting our sacred cows and hidebound thinking. At conferences, his audiences come away with Abram's clear voice echoing a sober but potentially bright future for libraries; and occasionally they leave angry, stirred up by his bold willingness to tackle controversial topics.

Interview with Stephen Abram, Vice President of Innovation for SirsiDynix and Chief Strategist for the SirsiDynix Institute

At the time of this writing, open source library blogs are blazing with both refutation and cautious agreements regarding Abram's position paper entitled, "Integrated Library System Platforms on Open Source." This article, with a first headline of "Caveat Emptor," outlines in sharp language the weaknesses of the open source concept from an inside the vendor's world perspective. An article well worth reading by all, check it out at: http://stephenslighthouse.sirsidynix.com/Open%20Source%20Position%20Paper%202009 1014%20FINAL%5B1%5D.pdf

For this interview with *Collaborative Librarianship*, Abram looks at the difference between cooperation and collaboration. He believes that collaboration can be transformational when done right. Abram's says, "Differences divide, commonalities unite. Those times when we reached a catharsis and were able to form a transformational collaboration that result in real change with exponential benefits are the most exciting." Despising the "puny vision" of many library cooperators, Abram makes the bold call that if we don't stop being competitive, libraries won't survive. As always, Abram's vision is provocative and challenging.

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CL: Could you elaborate on what you see as the top three or four key values of library collaboration?

Abram: Actually I see collaboration as a value in itself. That said, I think that there are some key aptitudes and attitudes that underpin collaboration. The four values I'd suggest that are paramount are respect, trust, flexibility, and compromise. If you can't be adult and mature enough to engage these values often, then the collaboration will most likely fail.

CL: What have been some of your most satisfying and rewarding involvements in library collaboration?

Abram: When it's going well I love library collaboration since it runs like a well-oiled machine. Then again, I think it's most satisfying and rewarding when you take the collaboration to the next level. Many things that libraries call collaboration are really just cooperation. To my mind and definition, collaboration can result in a significant transformation of all parties. Cooperation just meets some simple transactional goal like saving money on volume discounts or agreeing to play well with interlibrary loans. Cooperation is *simple*; collaboration is *hard* since it hits so many of those human hot buttons that generate emotional intensity ─ territorialism, ego, identity,

sharing, power, etc. So, I find it more satisfying and rewarding to work in collaborations when things appear ambiguous and everyone is hot under the collar. This the exact point when there is no guarantee of success — unless everyone reaches a new plateau of understanding and generates an environment of trust, safety, respect and compromise in pursuit of the ultimate goal.

I despise puny visions. Library collaborations aren't about 5% discounts. We must get to where we collaborate and set social standards, drive social cohesion and encourage an ecology where positive learning and community experiences, discoveries and social engagement in our social institutions, workplaces and neighborhoods grow.

I can say that my involvement either as a guide, participant or leader in helping consortia form or evolve was quite rewarding. Helping groups of people coalesce and see beyond types of library problems into collaborative opportunities is exciting. Indeed, it often takes special skill for people to see where they have common interest; usually people have more common interests than differences. Differences divide, commonalities unite. Those times when we reached a catharsis and were able to form a transformational collaboration that resulted in real change with exponential benefits are the most exciting.

CL: How about learning from the past? What collaborative initiatives didn't work well and what can we glean from their failure?

Abram: We absolutely learn best from failure so this question is a great one. I've participated in my share of failures — mostly just stumbles on the way to the bigger win. I had a boss with a wall plaque that said, "No Mistake Is Ever Final." So to be short because this is a big question, I'll just express three things I've learned from failures in the collaborating:

1. Never, ever, underestimate culture. Culture trumps everything. You must align with cultural values. If you attack them, you make them stronger and change won't happen. The people inside the organization own the culture, not the organization. They have all the power, and if you forget that, you will fail.

2. Invest most of your project time in planning, not implementing. Your ability to achieve corrections in your course declines precipitously after you officially start the collaboration. So you should plan, forecast, schedule, and then start.

3. Pay attention to people issues. Change resistance isn't really resistance, but a request for more information and engagement. People collaborate, not things or organizations. People always (and I mean *always*) say there is not enough communication. Organizations try to remedy this by communicating more and more. And they still fail. Unfortunately leaders listen and start to 'tell' more or, worse, 'memo and e-mail and post' more. That will fail. Collaboration works when you engage the forces you need to changed behaviors. That means conversations, town halls, open forums, open doors, listening and discussion. It's almost the opposite of the library culture of having a policy for everything.

CL: Libraries have a long and impressive history of working together such as with interlibrary loan. What other types of partnerships and networking do you see as important to growing, thriving libraries?

Abram: Libraries may have a long and impressive history of cooperation but that isn't collaboration. Most consortia are misnamed. They're buying clubs and everyone usually doesn't play. Collaboration requires you to put some meat in the game — not just money but also emotion and other resources. So the new types of partnerships that are growing in

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importance are collaborations where there are shared entities — sharing servers and policies, sharing content, sharing staff. These are more sophisticated and require more time to set up and nurture. They also have more upside potential for libraryland.

CL: What do you believe are some of the greatest current challenges to library collaboration?

Abram: Giving something up to get something bigger. That's really hard. Can we give up the boundaries of our library system? Can we give up control of everything in the library? Can we give up our functional organization by type of library? Too many self-imposed boundaries limit our success. Those boundaries don't have real relevance to the end user and that is where we should focus. A simple example is: why do some see the high school student who is also a public library card holder as two different patrons? There is a fictional user in some library's heads that doesn't divide up that way. How about the public library cardholder who is also taking college distance education courses?

CL: Looking toward 2020, what new challenges for libraries do you see on the horizon? How might libraries partner to meet these challenges?

Abram: The economy in the United States in particular is in a long downturn cycle. If we want libraries to remain what they are we must change; if we don't change we can't remain what we are. We must engage in much higher levels of collaboration amongst libraries and that is still NOT enough. Libraries are dependent on their host organizations and cities, towns and counties and they MUST start to collaborate more there. And lastly,

libraries are tightly tied to their vendors and publishers. They must move from a combative model to one that is collaborative. If libraries continue on this path of competitiveness and combativeness, we don't stand a chance.

Biography: Stephen Abram, MLS, is the immediate Past President 2008 of SLA and a past- President of the Canadian Library Association and the Ontario Library Association. Currently, Abram is Vice President Innovation for SirsiDynix and Chief Strategist for the SirsiDynix Institute. He has been Vice President of Corporate Development for Micromedia ProQuest and IHS as well as Publisher Electronic Information for Thomson. He ran libraries for Suncor, Coopers & Lybrand; Smith Lyons Torrance Stevenson; and Mayer and Hay Group. Abram was listed by *Library Journal* as one of their first "Movers and Shakers," the 'key' people influencing the future of libraries and librarianship. He has been awarded SLA's John Cotton Dana Award as well as being a Fellow of the SLA. He was Canadian Special Librarian of the Year and Alumni of the Year for the Faculty of Information Studies at the University of Toronto. He is an adjunct professor at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Information / iSchool and sits on the advisory councils of four library schools. He still sits on the SLA Board of Directors through Dec. 2009. In 2009 he received the prestigious Roger Summit Award from AIIP. He gives over 100 international keynote talks annually to library and information industry conferences and writes articles and columns for *Information Outlook, Feliciter, Access, Multimedia & Internet @ Schools,* and *Library Journal*. He is the author of ALA Editions' bestselling *Out Front with Stephen Abram*. His blog, *Stephen's Lighthouse*, is a popular blog in the library sector.