IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

Local and Global, Now and Forever: A Matrix Model of "Depth Perception" in Library Work

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Academic libraries are in an interesting and difficult position, one that makes us different from most other public and private institutions. We are charged with meeting the immediate needs of students and faculty (needs that can usually be identified and defined with at least some degree of precision), but also with creating lasting collections that will meet the largely unpredictable needs of future users. At the same time, we also function as supportive infrastructure on our campuses, active contributors to the scholarly and creative output of our institutions and profession, and participants in a global scholarly communication ecosystem. Our functions are local and global, short-term and long-term, just-in-time and just-in-case.

Depth Perception: Spatial and Temporal

Working within this complex structure of needs and expectations requires us constantly to be shifting focus. Think about how your eyes work: they have muscles that contract and relax in order to adjust the distance between the retina and the lens, making it possible for you to shift your attention from objects that are far away, to objects that are in the near distance, to objects that are very close. Depth perception is the ability to locate objects in space when they're at different distances from you.

Now consider how you think about the work you do in your library, whether it be as a support staffer, a librarian, a manager, or an administrator. Is your focus generally on more distant and global issues (the scholarly communication system, copyright law, intellectual freedom), or on issues somewhere in the midrange (how the library's services support the institutional mission, whether your collection matches the curriculum, how your ILL operation works with those of other institutions in the state), or on issues that are very close and granular (whether your signage is helpful, how equipment is maintained, how budgets are managed)? I'll call this set of concerns the "spatial" vector of perspective.

The issue of perspective applies in a temporal sense as well as a spatial one. To pick a global issue (the scholarly communication system) as an illustration: is your day-to-day focus mainly on long-term issues (is the journal subscription model sustainable?), on midterm issues (what will be the state of the scholarly monograph five years from now?), or on short-term ones (what will happen if Journal X is bought by Publisher Y?). I'll call this the "temporal" vector of perspective.

The interaction of these two vectors can be expressed simply in a two-dimensional matrix like this:

Depth-Perception Matrix of Library Work
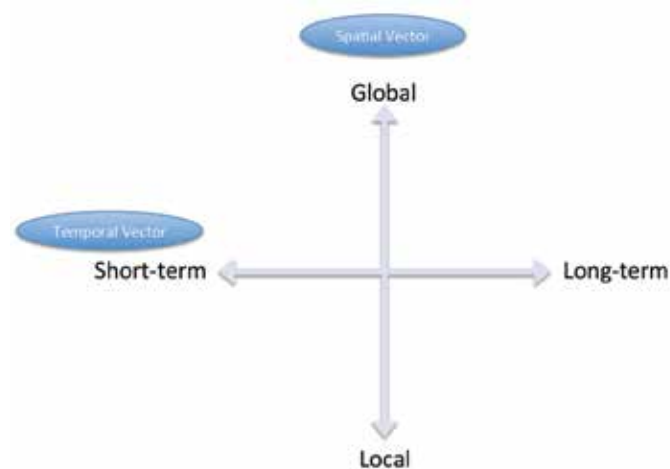
The general orientation of any particular librarian on any particular issue will fall somewhere in (or, more likely, across) the four quadrants defined by this matrix. So will the mission of an individual academic library — the library at a national university may be expected to focus substantially on its role as a long-term and comprehensive archive, while the library at a regional community college may be charged almost exclusively with serving students and faculty in the here-and-now. Most academic libraries serve some combination of these functions, but the mix will vary quite a bit from library to library, depending on the needs and missions of the institutions that host (and pay for) them.

Attitudes and Orientations

To help us think about the interactions and implications of these dynamics, I'll characterize each of the four quadrants with a phrase that seems to me to describe the overriding attitude that is predominant in each one — bearing in mind (and accepting, for the purposes of this model) that in each case, that phrase represents an oversimplification.
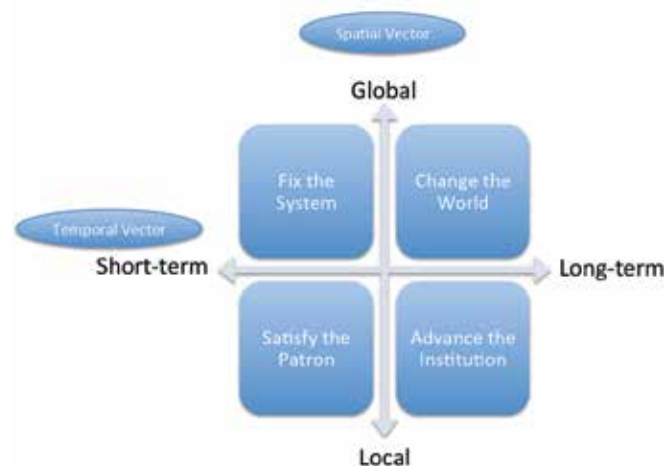
So, for example: if I think about a library policy or practice exclusively as it affects *my library's patrons* (local) in the *here and now* (short-term), my perspective on that policy or practice is falling squarely into the lower-left quadrant of this model ("Satisfy the Patron"). If I tend to focus on how it might affect the *world of scholarship* (global) in the *long run* (long-term), then my perspective on that issue falls into the upper-right quadrant ("Change the World"). And so forth.

Applying the Model

It's important to bear in mind that no quadrant in this matrix has a monopoly on right answers to the difficult questions facing us in libraries and the scholarly communication system. Each perspective has something to recommend it, and each poses potential problems. At every point in this model there is a mix of upsides and downsides, and this suggests that it would probably not be wise for any individual to pick a single spot in this matrix and plant an ideological flag there.

For example, on the temporal vector: one upside of maintaining a long-term focus is that you may see threats coming on the horizon that those with a shorter focus do not. (For example, subscribing to comprehensive journal packages may provide spectacular value to patrons in the near term, but may not be sustainable in the long run.) But a downside of the long-term perspective is that if you're not careful, you can let yourself be paralyzed by "what-ifs." The farther you look down the road, the more possible scenarios — many

of them undesirable — you will see, and worrying too much about the risk of undesirable scenarios can lead you to overlook important needs and opportunities in the near term. At the other end of the temporal spectrum, an upside of the short-term focus is that it makes you less easily distracted by "what-ifs" and more willing to try new things and take risks. But a downside of the short-term perspective is that it can lead to a posture of reactivity and a neglect of essential planning and strategy.

On the spatial vector: one upside of maintaining a global perspective is that it helps you to put your library work in a larger context and to see implications of your work that are not locally obvious. A downside of that perspective is that it can cause you to overlook the needs of your patrons and your local curriculum. At the other end of the spatial spectrum, an upside of the local focus is that it tends to attract more institutional support for the library, since it leads the library to position itself as a strategic partner on campus; a downside is that it may lead you to make decisions that contribute to global and systemic problems that go against the interests of students and scholars both locally and in the larger system.

Limiting Factors and Institution Mission

Now, the fact that no single quadrant in this model has a monopoly on "right" perspectives doesn't mean that no single perspective on any issue (or in any situation) can be called "right." And this brings up a very important caveat: while the range of personal and professional perspectives among us is likely to be very broad — some of us naturally tending to focus more on the global long-term, others on the local short-term, etc. — what varies much less is the variety of organizations that employ us. Each of us is employed by an organization that has an institutional focus that may or may not accord with our personal predilections, but that nevertheless *has to inform the focus of the work we do in the library.* This is actually true whether we work for libraries, publishers, foundations, grantmakers, hospitals, government agencies, or any other organization. As professionals, we have an obligation to do more than just express our own attitudes and beliefs at work; while those attitudes and beliefs certainly will and should *inform* our work, they should only *define* our work to the degree that they match those of the institutions that employ us. If there is unsustainable friction between our own attitudes and our institutions' needs, then the professional and ethical thing to do is not to undermine the institution or ignore its mission, but — to be brutally frank — to look for other work.

Does this mean that we should do nothing to shift our institutions' values if we disagree or see problems with them? Absolutely not. All of us can be a force for positive change (as we understand it) within the institutions that employ us, and in fact I would argue that we have a moral — as well as professional — obligation to do so. We also usually have the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of institutional objectives and strategies, and we should actively pursue those opportunities. We will (and should) naturally bring our own perspectives and attitudes with us when we participate in shaping the future directions of our institutions.

But ultimately, the institution is going to be what the institution is going to be. Sometimes our individual values and preferences will start to diverge from those of our institutions until there comes a point at which we have to decide whether or not we can continue to work for that institution.

What this implies, I believe, is that each of us needs to examine our own predilections and perspectives and see how they fall along the two dimensions defined by this matrix, and then examine the institutional orientation that is defined by our campuses' and libraries' goals and strategies. Each of us should then ask her- or himself: how close is the fit between what I want to do, what I believe is right, and my institution's mission and goals? And if there's a lot of daylight between those two orientations, then the next — and much more difficult — question is: what am I going to do about that? The answer to that question will vary from person to person and from place to place, of course. For each of us, knowing where we stand on these important issues of depth perception will help us decide whether the place we are is the right one for us. 🐿️