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Balanced Libraries: Thoughts on Continuity and Change

Walt Crawford

Balanced libraries: Thoughts on continuity and change, by Walt Crawford – A Review Essay

Review of *Balanced libraries: Thoughts on continuity and change* by Crawford, Walt (2007). Cites and Insights. 252 p. $21.50 (available from http://www.lulu.com/content/737992)

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Republished, with permission, from http://jdupuis.blogspot.com/2007/06/crawford-walt-balanced-libraries.html.

[*Assistant Ed. Note:* As I started reading my copy of *Balanced Libraries*, I wondered what would be the best way to introduce this great book to the non-blogging science librarians. I pondered writing a review, but then I ran across this enthusiastic review from Engineering and Science-Technology Division member, John Dupuis.]

The library literature. I don't know about you, but those three words strike fear in my heart. When I think library literature, the word that comes to mind is, well, turgid. (And to be fair, most bodies of official scholarly literature are just as turgid, if not more so, so I'm not picking on us any more than any other discipline.) Books and articles that are basically a struggle to get through, dull, overlong, full of jargon. Just awful. For all the great ideas that can be encapsulated in the articles, the execution can often leave a bit to be desired. And the articles I've inflicted on the world are no different, I'm sure. So, what's to be done? Engage the biblioblogosphere, of course! Lively and diverse, full of opinion and debate, mostly written in a conversational, accessible style. The experimental rigor might not be there, but that's more than made up for by diversity, immediacy and accessibility.

On the other hand, wouldn't it be nice to have a shining example of a book that is well written and with ambitious, almost scholarly, intentions, well thought out arguments, deeply explored ideas, intellectually rigorous debate that seriously engages the most important professional topics of the day? Impossible, you say. I say, I'm holding that very book right here in my hands and it's *Walt Crawford's Balanced*

libraries: Thoughts on Continuity and Change. And the issue it is engaging is perhaps the most important facing our profession these days: how to embrace new technological possibilities while still maintaining our core values as libraries and librarians while not going completely crazy in the process. And how does Crawford's fare in this endeavor? Pretty darn good, if you ask me. There's a lot of very profound wisdom in this book, and I would recommend it very seriously to any library professional, especially to those that are most directly engaged in building technology solutions for libraries.

There's a lot of good stuff in this book that I want to talk about, but first let's talk a little about the author for those of you who may not know about him. Walt Crawford is the author of numerous other books (including the excellent *First Have Something to Say*, which I've also read and which was influential in my blogging career), the important library ezine *Cites & Insights* (http://citesandinsights.info/) and his blog *Walt at Random* (http://walt.lishost.org/). A sage and sane voice in the biblioblogosphere, one that many have found inspiring.

And now, *Balanced Libraries*.

Balanced Libraries

Thoughts on Continuity and Change

Walt Crawford

A Cites & Insights Book
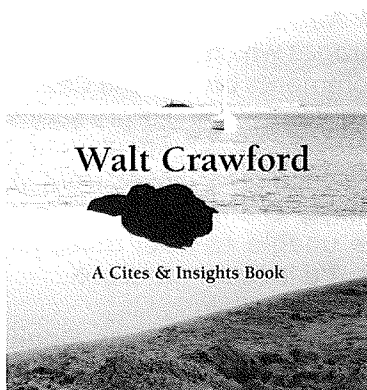
One of the best things about this book was that it provoked an awful lot of internal debates as I was reading it. You know how when you're reading a book and suddenly you're stopped in your tracks by something? It doesn't matter if you agree or disagree (and I certainly didn't agree with everything in Crawford's book), it makes you think, it makes you start a kind of virtual discussion with the author. You find yourself saying, "But, what if..." or "You know, that's not how I think that would happen..." or "Right on, and what about..." It takes a long time to read a book like that, because so much of your time is spent digesting what you've read. It often took me a day or two in between chapters to process. Lee Smolin's *The Trouble with Physics*, which I was reading more or less simultaneously, was the same.

So, what were those debates, what were

the topics I endlessly worked over with my imaginary Walt Crawford? Well, let's take a look at the book more or less chapter by chapter and see what I came up with.

Chapter 1 (A Question of Balance) is the introduction. Crawford defines balance as "change with continuity," "expansion over replacement," and "continuous improvement over transformation," which is a definition I can live with. I guess you could say my first virtual debate was here, struggling with my own definition of balance. Like Crawford, I think I favor gradual, incremental change most of the time, but I do have a bit of the revolutionary in me as well and certainly this section helped me come to my own definition, even if it's a bit less than ideally "balanced." But it's a good way to start the book, to make sure we're more or less on the same wave length.

Chapter 2 (Patrons and the Library) really resonated with me. Are the "patrons always right?" Do we do what ever they want, no matter what, even if it might be outside our core mission? To what degree to we "pander" to patrons' every whim and to what degree do we use our professional judgment to decide what's best for them? A difficult question, one that I don't have the answer for -- and this chapter provoked a lot of introspection.

Chapter 4 (Existing Collections and Services) struck a bit of an off note for me. In the discussion about existing collections there's quite a long section that romanticizes traditional book browsing on the shelves. I'm not sure the serendipity you get from browsing on the shelves is better than the kind of serendipity a good online system (with tags and recommendation systems, for example) can give you. I appreciate and use both kinds of discovery but I think that they can and should be profoundly complementary.

Chapter 6 (Balancing Generations) treats that hoary old proposition: kids today are going to hell in a hand basket/old fogies are so out of touch. Crawford struck a good balance here, talking about balancing the needs of younger vs. older patrons and the strengths of more experienced staff vs. new grads. Being a newer librarian who's not so young, I found a lot to like in this chapter, even if I sometimes seemed to find myself in both camps at once.

Chapter 7 (Pushing Back: Balance vs. Resistance) has a discussion of the dangers of

Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt (FUD) that got me thinking. It seems that there's a challenge here, how to find a model for life-long contribution to the profession for everybody, not just the tech-savviest. Ultimately, we all get a little duller around the cutting edge (some less than others, some earlier than others), so how do we harness the wisdom and experience of those that have been-there-done-that?

Chapters 8 (Naming and Shaming) and **9 (Improving and Extending Services)** were perhaps the most provocative and compelling in the book. They give the compelling and controversial story of the Library 2.0 wars, from the True Believers to the doubters to the mushy middlers. Crawford's portrayal of many of the L2 advocates is considerably less than flattering, to the point where I found myself shaking my head and remembering why I mostly stayed on the sidelines for the debate. On the other hand, Chapter 9 is an amazing exposition of perhaps what L2 is really about. I often found myself nodding my head in vigorous agreement, thinking "Gee, that's cool" or "Maybe I should try that!" The contrast between the two chapters is telling: in one librarians sound shrill and a bit mean, in the other we sound open minded, progressive and brilliant. Chapters 10 through 13 really just expand on the possibilities for embracing balanced change begun in chapter 9.

Chapters 14 (Balanced Librarians) and **15 (Change and Continuity)** form a kind of extended conclusion for the book. Chapter 14 challenges us as professionals to take it easy, to use our time and energy wisely, to pace ourselves but at the same time to stop and think, to focus our concentration and really contemplate our situation. Chapter 15 brings it all together, challenging us to once again think deeply about what is worth keeping and what needs to be changed. As Crawford closes, "Whatever names you adopt, whatever tools wind up suiting your needs, I hope these thoughts will help you find a balance of continuity and change." (p. 229)

Well, you get the idea. Every chapter will make you think.

Another really interesting thing about this book was how it advanced the form of scholarship. Here's a self-published book with very serious intentions, not lightweight at all, which mostly referenced blogs in the bibliography. I find that really interesting. A book that's about how

librarians should engage the most important issues in their professional practice and it's mostly propelled by bloggers and not by reams of articles in the official scholarly journals. By my quick count, 151/187, or about 80% of the items in the bibliography are blog posts. And he makes us sound pretty good too. And I'm not just saying that because my blog appears three times in the bibliography.

For the most part, Crawford showcases the best writing and the best thinking out there among the liblogs (except for Chapter 8, mentioned above, but even that showcases some real passion too); we are committed and engaged and thinking about the issues. If you are a

liblogger and your colleagues are a bit skeptical about the worth of what you are doing, show them this book. What we do, if we do it well, is worthy for our tenure files, for our professional CV's. Our work on our blogs should be counted the same as any one else's contributions in traditional media based on its intrinsic quality not its format or place of publication. Thanks to Crawford, we have an example of what we are capable of presented in a somewhat more traditional format and written by someone whose contributions to the field cannot be easily dismissed. We appreciate the support.

But enough of me. Go buy the book. One for yourself and one for your library's collection. ❖

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2007 Annual Conference Session Reports

Science of Beer

Monday, June 4, 2007
Presented by: Science-Technology, Chemistry and Food, Agriculture & Nutriion Divisions
Sponsored by: ACS Publications, Annual Reviews, CAS, Elsevier, Royal Society of Chemistry
Speaker: Dr. Charles Bamforth, University of California, Davis
Moderator: James Manaasco, University of Louisville
Reported by: Michael White, Librarian for Research Services, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario

Many people celebrate the end of a long day at work by relaxing with a cold beer at their local pub. But for professor Charlie Bamforth, going to the pub for a pint isn't just idle recreation or an escape from work, it's serious business. Dr. Bamforth has spent more than thirty years studying the amber-colored liquid that is the world's most popular beverage. In fact, he is one of the world's leading authorities on the art and science of brewing. Approximately 100 SLA attendees were fortunate to hear Dr. Bamworth's entertaining and informative lecture on the art, science and history of beer.

Sporting glasses, a bald pate, round nose, plump cheeks and modest beer belly, Dr. Bamforth looks like the typical male beer drinker. His knowledge of beer, however, is encyclopedic. He brings to the subject the curiosity and insight of a scientist and the creativity and wit of an artist. Bamforth is the Anheuser-Busch Endowed Professor of Brewing Science and Chair of the Department of Food Science and Technology at the University of California, Davis, where he has

worked since 1999. He started in the brewing industry in 1978 and worked for UK-based Bass Brewers and Brewing Research International, an independent research organization. His published work includes seven books and more than 100 articles. He also holds a US patent (4,880,643) on a process that improves the head on a glass of beer. He has given hundreds of presentations to groups and organizations, including the New York Academy of Sciences.

Dr. Bamforth's lecture started with a basic overview of the four ingredients of beer: water, barley, yeast and hops. Beer, in fact, is 90 percent water and was widely consumed in the days before the reliable availability of clean drinking water. (Alcohol kills pathogens.) He then reviewed the brewing process and various styles of beer ranging from lagers, ales and pilsners to porters and stouts.

The most interesting part of his lecture was the discussion of chemical compounds that impart both desirable and undesirable qualities to beer. For example, vicinal diketones such as diacetyl and pentanedione impart butterscotch and honey flavors to beer. Sulfur compounds, on the other hand, are linked to the odor of rotten eggs, overripe cabbage and skunk, giving rise to the term "skunky beer." The oils and resins found in hops, the spice of beer, impart bitterness to some styles of beer that is much favored by "hopheads" and others who enjoy ales with a kick.

On the current practice of placing a slice of lemon or lime in beer, Dr. Bamforth was adamant: "you do not put foreign bodies in beer." He

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