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## The Creativity Issue: Putting the Spotlight on Creative Work in Urban Libraries

Steven J. Bell  
Guest Editor

Steven J. Bell is Associate University Librarian for Research and Instructional Services at Temple University. Prior to that he was Director of the Paul J. Gutman Library at Philadelphia University and Assistant Director at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also earned his Ed.D. in 1997. He writes and speaks frequently on topics such as information retrieval, library and learning technologies, and academic librarianship. An Adjunct Professor at the Drexel University College of Information Science and Technology, he teaches courses in academic librarianship and information retrieval. He maintains a Web site and Weblog, Steven Bell's Keeping Up Web Site and The Kept-Up Academic Librarian, that promote current awareness skills and resources. Steven is a co-founder of the Blended Librarian's Online Learning Community on the Learning Times Network and has participated in numerous virtual presentations. He blogs for ACRLog, ACRL's official Weblog and Designing Better Libraries. For additional information about Steven J. Bell or to find links to the various Web sites he publishes and maintains, point your browser to <http://stevenbell.info>.

In a recent interview, Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon.com, gave his perspective on how organizations can still succeed in difficult times. He said "One of the only ways to get out of a tight box is to invent your way out...with thoughtfulness and focus on the customer" (*BusinessWeek*, April 28, 2008, p.64). Looking out at our current challenging and uncertain information landscape, it appears that libraries are increasingly confined to tight boxes. Whether the solution requires invention or innovation, escaping the box requires creativity. From the minds of creative librarians come the innovative programs that will enable libraries to avoid future marginalization or obsolescence. According to [Daniel Pink](#), author of *A Whole New Mind*, we are already leaving the Information Age, in which the left-brain thinker ruled the workplace. Left-brain thinkers depend on rationality and linear thinking to achieve success. Pink believes we are poised to enter the Conceptual Age and that it will belong to the right-brain thinker. Right-brain thinkers are creative, non-linear minded individuals who use their talents to develop solutions that are a blend of the high-touch and high-tech. Who better to lead the way in the Conceptual Age than the creative librarian?

That's why this special issue about creativity in libraries is just right for the times. First, it's important to celebrate the many creative minds working in this profession. Libraries have traditionally worked with restrained resource pools. To have come so far with so many successes is owing to the high levels of creative thinking in our libraries. Second, as we find ourselves in times of rapid change our most valuable asset is our ability to master the art of adaptation. If one program

fails, if users seem to be going elsewhere for their information, if user expectations shift unexpectedly, then library workers must use their creativity to quickly adapt. By understanding our user communities, we can create new programs that leverage our skill sets to deliver new services and new ideas that will continue to make the library a community destination, both physical and virtual.

We have compiled here a set of dynamic articles that demonstrate that there is no lack of creativity in the world of librarianship. But you probably already knew that. Anyone who has worked in this field for any length of time knows there are many creative people attracted to the field of librarianship. Yet we rarely use our journal literature to promote the many acts of creativity happening at our libraries. This special issue of *Urban Library Journal* changes that. You will find articles of two types in this issue. First, a set of full length articles that explore how librarians used their creative thinking or creative processes to establish new services and programs to better meet the needs of their users. Second, shorter articles we call “Reports from the Field” offer case studies of interesting programs that serve as examples of how, with little more than a creative idea, libraries can bring a whole new level of service to the end user or improve internal processes to make for a more effective library organization.

While it’s certainly easy to say, “Hey, all librarians should be more creative,” actually being creative is something that may not come naturally to all librarians. What if a librarian feels he or she is just not the creative type? Is it sufficient to simply allow that one is ruled by left-brain thinking, and that individually we either are or are not creative? In our leadoff article titled “The Eye of the Brainstorm: Transforming the Library through Creative Idea Building” Lisa Forrest, Media Resources Librarian at the [State University of New York College at Buffalo](#), takes the perspective that there are things librarians can do to get in touch with their inner creativity. She uses the brainstorming model as the way to stimulate creativity and provides a series of activities and actions librarians can adopt to achieve greater workplace creativity. And when it comes to creative thinking and action, Forrest’s example of how they celebrated National Poetry Month at her library will show that librarians can do far more than put books on display. If you’ve been feeling a creativity lapse, Forrest’s ideas may be just what you need to turn it around.

Just having access to technology isn’t enough. Too many librarians take a “make the technology available and then wait for users to notice” approach to innovation, and it rarely works. Without an infusion of creativity, technology is nothing but a tool. That message is well communicated by Ramona Islam and Leslie Porter, reference and instruction librarians at [Fairfield University](#), in their article “Perseverance and Play: Making a Movie for the YouTube Generation.” Case in point, look at some of the library promotional videos that librarians have created for and posted to YouTube. The majority, while good efforts, are hardly likely to attract much more than curious librarians looking for library videos. What our colleagues at Fairfield have done with their video, “Fairfield Beach,” takes the art of the library promotional video to a whole new level, and the differentiating factor is

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creativity. While Forrest discusses how to use brainstorming for creativity, Islam and Porter use a case study approach to show how brainstorming inspired their creativity and helped them work their way through a variety of challenges. What you're most likely to learn from this article is not how to use cool technology for outreach. While that's an important part of this article, what's really important is that creative minds are not deterred by initial failures or roadblocks but instead use their creativity to work through these barriers in order to develop even better ideas that transform the mundane into the unique. Using clickers to allow students to decide how the library video should turn out? Pure creative genius.

And what would our special issue be without a nod to technology and how it can be used in unexpected ways to develop and promote unique library services. Most readers may already know Bruce Connolly and Gail M. Golderman, librarians at the [Schaffer Library](#) at [Union College](#), for their ongoing series of electronic resources reviews that appear regularly in *Library Journal's* quarterly netConnect supplement. Their contribution to this issue, the article "Listen Up: Discovering the Reference and Instructional Applications of Apple's iTunes" may seem, on the surface, just another article about a library making use of a youth culture technology. But scratch below the surface and you'll find a first-rate example of how creative library minds can take an everyday technology and turn it into a resource that supports class assignments and promotes the library and its resources. Universities and their libraries are making use of iTunes University, but few have discovered so many ways to use standard iTunes software and the iTunes store to connect the library with the classroom. While there may be nothing particularly innovative about using iTunes today, what these librarians have done with it shouts out innovation and creativity.

There is no dearth of research and anecdotal evidence that informs us that our citizens read less than ever. For the first time in recent memory, a national survey found that one person in four had not read even a single book in the prior year. The problem is compounded at institutions of higher education where leisure reading, in particular, is at an all-time low, especially among male students. If academic libraries exist to promote intellectual growth, should they not have some role in promoting reading among the student population? A noble cause we all agree, but how to make it happen is a dilemma we face. By exploring their creative side, Renée Bosman, John Glover and Monique Prince, librarians at [Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries](#), developed a unique program to foster more leisure reading in their community. In their article, "Growing Adult Readers: Promoting Leisure Reading in Academic Libraries," Bosman, Glover and Prince share with readers the variety of creative strategies and resources they used, including working with their public community reading programs to encourage and inspire more leisure reading at their library. Using a combination of blogs, book swaps, reading programs, bulletin boards and more, the authors describe a highly practical set of ideas that any academic library could adopt to reach students ignoring the pleasures and intellectual benefits of leisure book reading.

Thinking about organizations that creatively develop better services can start with a simple idea: where you work is where you live. That idea comes from Tony Tallent, [Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County](#), who writes about the importance of creating a fun workplace that supports creative thinking. Tallent observes that we spend a third of our days at our libraries, and that library workers who find themselves in dull, lifeless cubicles will also find their creativity sapped. Through interviews with colleagues and designers, Tallent provides creative ideas for how libraries can design workspaces that are sure to get their employees' creative juices flowing.

As you move into the "Reports from the Field" selections you will discover an interesting array of practical ideas for leveraging creativity in your library. Acts of great creativity in librarianship need not depend on grandiose programs or large-scale budgets. They can actually revolve around something as small as a ten-cent button. Jill E. Luedke and Sarah K. Laleman Ward, reference and instruction librarians at the [Sophie Gimbel Design Library](#) at the Parsons New School of Design in New York City, explain how creativity can be harnessed for effective, quirky, low-cost library marketing in their article titled "It All Started With a Button." With a relatively inexpensive button maker these librarians created a new trend among their students while creating opportunities to promote the library. The buttons capture images from library resources and are used as rewards in library instruction programs and as giveaways at institutional events. Students have taken to collecting them. Luedke and Ward share their ideas for developing creative marketing ideas and explain how they feed off the creativity that is a part of their design school culture. Creating a culture of "fearless creativity" is within the capacity of all libraries.

Creativity can also apply to more familiar ways of reaching users; it need not involve fiercely original ideas but simply new ways to approach a well-known service with some fearlessness. The idea of "roving reference" or the provision of reference services outside the library is hardly a new idea, and Lisa Lavoie readily admit this in her article titled "Roving Librarians: Taking it to the Streets." But when they obtained a grant to rove around their community college campus with a wireless equipped laptop, printer and a few chairs, the authors brought some unique creativity to get their students to take notice. Their reward for taking a few risks and being willing to sacrifice a bit of their dignity was reaching students and faculty who might never otherwise communicate with a librarian. As the author points out, just getting a conversation going with the campus community can be regarded as an act of creativity.

There is perhaps no better expression of creativity than art and in their article titled "Using Art to Promote Student Learning and Build Community Partnerships" Lynn S. Mullins and Ann V. Watkins, librarians at Rutgers University's Newark Campus, describe how their library makes the connection between art and reading and research. This happens because a design decision was made to incorporate an art gallery into the library building. Many libraries contain and display works of art, but the [John Dana Cotton Library](#) at Rutgers Newark

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takes art programming seriously and finds ways to weave art appreciation into the teaching and learning process on their campus. Again, creative ways of reaching the community and getting them engaged in the library can happen in so many ways. Mullins and Watkins demonstrate that one path to engagement is the appreciation of art.

Inspiration for creativity can come from many sources. But can it be developed through an administrative process to facilitate better organizational decision making? Laverna Saunders, University Librarian, [Duquesne University](#), explores this possibility in her article titled “Using the Power of Proposals for Creative Change.” As in many situations, a transformative creative solution came out of a traditional library problem: how to encourage staff to come up with good ideas for change and then communicate them to colleagues and the administration. What Saunders discusses, in case study style, is a proposal process developed at her library that facilitates positive change. The primary outcome of the process, which uses a standardized proposal submission template, is that librarians who might never otherwise come forth with their creative solutions now have a mechanism for sharing their great ideas with the library director and colleagues. Although Saunderson’s proposal process is a formal management program, it engages staff and encourages them to use their creativity to develop new programs. As the article documents, it can boost staff enthusiasm and build a creativity culture.

Immerse yourself in these articles and you will be rewarded with a host of eminently practical ideas, many of which are free of significant costs or technologies with steep learning curves. The goal of this issue is to stimulate the reader to think creatively about his or her own library environment and how creativity can be applied to both everyday challenges and the much larger challenge of developing services, programs and resources that make the library relevant to its user community. If we are successful in achieving our outcome, we expect to see creative ideas taking seed in our profession and resulting in the flowering of many more examples of the type of innovative ideas contained in this issue of *Urban Library Journal*.

Many thanks to Lisa FINDER and Lauren Yannotta for inviting me to serve as guest editor for this issue of *Urban Library Journal*. It certainly has afforded me the opportunity to explore my own inner creativity.

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