

# The Next Generation of Us

I collect cookbooks. I read them like novels, turning each page with expectation to marvel at how good cooks can string ingredients together to make intriguing concoctions in the way that good authors string words together to create intriguing sentences. I especially love the old cookbooks from the 1930s – 1950s, when included in every cookbook were not only the ingredients and cooking methods, but also household tips and specific directions for nutrition, tablesetting, decoration, and other niceties of ideal life from those times. Reading those cookbooks is a cultural snapshot of the expectations for the wife of the household, whose sole goal was always to greet her husband at the door with hair and makeup perfect and with sedate, clean, and smiling children around her. There was no deviation expected or allowed from that vision of the user of the cookbook even through the reality rarely if ever fit that stereotype. In the minds of the cookbook writers, vacuuming with pearls and white gloves was how housewifery was done.

I am especially intrigued in those cookbooks by the rules, implicit and stated, for how the lady (by any definition of the word) of the house was to prepare and serve food. We would be amused today to be given such strict rules and guidelines. Life has changed in every aspect. There is no longer a single definition of a family, and the assumption of who is responsible for taking care of the household has changed as well. At some point in the 1960s or '70s, cookbooks focused on the food and stopped giving life instruction lessons. No more was there a stereotypical assumption of who the cook reading the directions would be.

## Leadership in Libraryland

I think the same thing is true for the instruction and preparation of librarians. The profession had rules for everything that good and proper librarians did. Books were shelved ½ inch from the front edge of the shelf and most librarians have heard tales of supervisors who travelled with rulers to make sure junior librarians followed that rule to a knife edge. Librarians of a certain age remember typing sets of catalog cards, with specific rules for main entry card, subject card, title card, and the all important shelflist card. We thought and we taught that well-kept accession books and shelflists were the measure of good librarianship. Patrons were rarely mentioned, except for how to keep them quiet and how to repair the books that would inevitably be returned with some kind of damage.

There are still rules, protocols, and policies that provide the structural foundation of the field. Those rules have given us strength and produced the leaders who brought us into this century. The rules defined not only what a library was, but also what a librarian was. Librarians were the people who knew the jargon, followed the rules, and produced collections to meet the needs of users.

But just as with the rules in cookbooks, the rules for librarians have started to break down. There is no longer time to produce heavy meals, and health guidelines dictate a different way of cooking. The same is true for libraries. Libraries have grown and stretched to hold an almost infinite variety of formats, and the needs of our users have grown and stretched as well. We can't do everything that we used to do, and we need to turn for leadership and mentorship not to those who have taught us, but instead to those we've taught.

## Breaking the Rules

The strong foundation of a shared structure of rules made modern libraries possible. Strong leaders broke new ground to create protocols for sharing catalogs and resources. The hallowed precept that if you learned to use one library you could use any library was never completely true, but true enough for the Dewey Decimal worksheets cranked out of the mimeograph machine for weekly

instructional lessons. The mission of the school library program remains as strong today as it was in the late 1980s when it was created. Creating independent users of ideas and information is what librarians do and is the purpose of libraries.

But, the field can also point to times when the rules have let us down. We never could manage to completely integrate video into the library collection. True, after a few years, we started to catalog audiovisual materials and include them in the catalog, but the resources themselves remained locked in the back room. Common arguments were that they were too expensive and that they could not easily fit on the shelf with the books. Later, when the format was changed to the book-like videotape and then the DVD and the price dropped to be less than many print books, the argument became that they could not be circulated to students because classroom teachers would not like it. These same librarians had no trouble with charging fines to classroom teachers for overdue or lost materials or starting the library circulation year a month later and ending a month earlier than the school year, things that classroom teachers surely must not have liked either. Neither argument has ever held water, but were still clung to as an excuse for holding off change.

True, there were individual librarians who fully integrated formats and who enacted the principles surrounding access and equity. These were few and far between, however. It can be said that an entire medium was created, rose in popularity, changed packaging to keep up with the times, and is now nearly obsolete without ever being accepted as a viable learning resource open and accessible to students.

We managed change by holding off change. The leaders that we praised were our pride and joy, but they were us, just in new and younger clothes and with a bit more energy. They followed the rules, made only small changes, and still followed the recipes of the past.

## **Ring in the New**

Social media, open educational resources, and virtual resources have changed that. Librarians started tagging, crowdsourcing subject headings, and allowing the cloud to create its own organizational system. Then some librarians looked up from their computers at their list of e-books arranged by subject or genre, then looked back at the collection and said “why not?” Librarians ditched Dewey, genrefied fiction, and created catalogs that made sense to their students. The library world watched in horror and reacted with fervor proclaiming “no one will ever be able to find anything again.” Middle school librarians shrugged and watched hordes of students running to the mystery section apparently well able to find exactly what they wanted.

It's not what we taught them. It's not who we were, or even who we are. Makerspaces are imaginative, ground-breaking, and incredibly messy. Planos and sewing machines, to say nothing of power tools, are loud and create even more mess. Even worse, some people who work in these disorganized, self-classified, uncataloged spaces are not even trained with the skills and experiences contained in a library degree.

These renegades are the next generation of us. They aren't who we were, or even who we are. They are writing their own rules with a library hand. They are applying the makerspace concept to not only the resources and services of the library, but to the structure of library practice.

The ghosts of librarians past will be astounded that these loud, messy, differently-organized spaces are libraries. They will search for familiar elements like a circulation desk, the librarian's stool safely ensconced behind that desk, an office, and a workroom in the same way that cookbook writers of the '30s and '40s would be astounded at the food processor, the microwave, and the convection oven.

But, some of us can say with pride that the next-gen librarians learned what we taught them. They learned the important stuff about students, about the importance of access, and they came to realize that it's not about libraries as hallowed halls. It never was. It's about learning and leadership. Now we have to learn from them as they rewrite the definition of librarians and librarianship. That's what true leaders do. They don't just relive the past, they create the future.

But the future is where our students are. By recreating libraries, the next generation of library leaders is ensuring that libraries will be there too.

## About the Author



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### *MLA Citation*

Dickinson, Gail K. "The Next Generation of Us." *School Library Connection*. ABC-CLIO, 2017. Web. 23 Jan. 2017.