

CLOSE YOUR EYES AND DREAM...

We dream, we imagine, we tell stories of the futures of our libraries ... or at least we should, according to Steve O'Connor, author of Imagining Your Library's Future: Scenario Planning for Library and Information Services.

Often we dream. We dream of many things. We dream that we have won the lottery, we dream that we can purchase a new car or a new home. We dream of what our future partner should be like. In all of these dreams we are using our imagination to create potential realities of what might be, or what we would like them to be. Our imagination shapes and colours these dreams and desires for the future, our future or our futures. These are our 'stories', our scenarios or visions of what the future could be like.

In the use of our imagination, we allow ourselves to visualise things which our more rational side will not allow us to believe. We know the odds against winning the lottery; we know that car is really beyond our savings. But we do allow ourselves to think, to dream of things we rationally do not believe in.

Yet do we really allow ourselves to think of library and information services which are beyond our current experience or beyond the rational understanding of the world in which we operate? Why is it we seem to expect the publishing industry, the library industry and our users to behave only in ways which we have already experienced?

We all hear and talk about change with little understanding of how it will impact on us. The future is an amorphous thing that we experience and perhaps embrace with hope or trepidation but with not enough understanding. But we do know the future is about change. As Barack Obama said not too long ago, "you can't stop change coming you can only usher it in and work out the terms. If you're smart and a little lucky you can make it your friend".

We need to allow ourselves to use our imagination to prepare for our professional future as well as our personal

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futures. We need to create stories, or scenarios, which might be for our library services and our careers. The use of these stories allows our imagination, wider intelligence and research to think about the things we usually do not allow ourselves to think about. There are many techniques to assist us arrive at these stories, known as scenario planning.

Scenario planning is a most valuable tool to encourage considered views of our futures at the same time as we are subjected to rapid and seemingly overwhelming amounts of change. It is an approach that considers different, even contrasting paths from those we might have otherwise allowed ourselves to consider.

It is important to understand the future is not linear. It is not straightforward, either at a personal or institutional level. It is complex and confusing. There are many paths, many decision points and storm clouds to cast doubt over our directions.

It is easier in some ways to understand the future through a rear vision mirror: in that mirror we can see more clearly how we came to the present. This view helps reveal the various paths we have travelled, the various decision points that have affected us in our journey to this day. These are the stories of how we came to where we are at present and understanding how this has come to be helps us begin imagining for what may be to come.

By approaching our professional future through imagining stories that might be, we allow many different perspectives to impinge on our planning, even if these stories may delay us making decisions about our future by compelling us to think of more than one possible future. (We do have plural futures, if only we would allow ourselves to create and explore them.) Stories allow different groups to join in the discussion and imagining about the future. Stories allow different sectors of our users and all levels of staff to join in the conversation deciding on the future path.

The crucial thing to understand about the future is that it should not be allowed to *happen to us* but rather that we *should shape it*. We should make it our friend.



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Email your answer to incite@alia.org.au and include your membership number and postal address. Competition closes September 21 2011. Winners will be notified by email.



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Steve O'Connor is a Director of Information Exponentials. His book Imagining Your Library's Future: Scenario Planning for Library and Information Services is published by Chandos Books (www.chandospublishing.com).



Dream scenario – Steve O'Connor

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