

Steering a future through Scenarios: into the academic library of the future

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Abstract

Scenario planning as a strategic tool for future planning was explored. The case study showed how the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Library applied the process to draw up its preferred future, and illustrated the importance of involving all stakeholders in every stage for the shared future to be acceptable to all.

Introduction

The future isn't what it used to be!

The recent past has changed academic libraries radically over the past ten years. The conception of a digital library has become a reality, or at least partially so. The old realities of purpose and mission are jaded and tired. The old assurances of simple formulaic statements of purpose do not resonate in the present let alone the future. As the famous futurist Marshall McLuhan once said: "Most of our assumptions have outlived their usefulness."¹ He also remarked: "Our Age of Anxiety is, in great part, the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools and yesterday's concepts". Both of these insights lead us to an understanding at least of the difficulties which we face today in libraries generally, and academic libraries in particular. To move forward is not to immediately abandon our previous assumptions of purpose and mission but to begin adopting new mindsets. To understand the path to our future is made more difficult as our concepts of the present are often not transportable into that future.

In trying to understand the future our profession has produced many reports seeking to analyse the present and expecting, through this, to be able to see our future. This approach is not all misdirected. The OCLC report on “Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources” is factually well researched but does not pretend to change outlooks, only to record changes in the landscape. “Trends toward increased information self-service and seamlessness are clearly evident.... Libraries’ mindshare in this self-service e-resource environment is also clear: behind newer entrants. Libraries’ continued importance as a trusted information provider is evident and, overall, users have positive, if outdated, views of the “Library”. Our collective challenge is where to invest more, invest less, invent new and invert old, communicate more and market better.”² The question is how to do what the report concludes. This is where new techniques are necessary; this is where we need to be disconnected from the present and its conceptual baggage; this is where marketing needs to take a back seat to new understandings and new concepts.

Literature Review

For the future library to survive and prosper, the continuous alignment of its strategic direction with the demands of the environment is vital, especially when the speed of changes is rapid, and the scope, extensive. However, changes that are unpredictable and complex in nature can sometimes be too threatening. In the face of uncertainty, psychological attachment to, and the defense of what are bound to change can be dangerous. When library managers underestimate the impact of the emerging trends on their traditional roles and values, they are not positioning their library and themselves to capitalize on changes. On the other hand, if the threat of change is overestimated, yet one’s ability’s to shape the future is underestimated, one might still be locked into inaction in decision making.³ Coping patterns of “bolstering failing strategy, procrastination and buck-passing” are identified as the typical signs of avoidance behaviors in responses to threatening change.⁴ As noted by Pierre Wack, inertia and failure to decide is often rooted in “the inability to see an emergent novel reality by being locked inside obsolete assumptions”.⁵

To free one from obsolete assumptions and overcome decision inertia and perceptual blind spots, a new planning tool called “scenario planning” emerged in the 1960’s. It was initially applied by the US government during the cold war for geopolitical and military analysis. In the 70’s Royal Dutch Shell pioneered its use in the corporate sector and successfully prepared the company for the oil crisis in 1973.⁶ Since then, scenario planning has been widely applied in both public and private sectors for product innovation, organizational re-engineering, public policy analysis, city planning, crime prevention, and NGO services.⁷ Numerous articles in management journals have been published recording how creative decision makers embrace it as a tool to stimulate organizational

learning⁸, to change organization culture⁹, and to challenge deeply held beliefs.¹⁰ A consultancy firm registered TAIDA (Tracking, Analysing, Imaging, Deciding, Acting) as its trademark and the name of the framework used in “hundreds of scenario planning projects for public and private business and organizations.”¹¹ By systematically identifying and analyzing the inter-relationship between the critical driving forces in the external and internal environment, leveraging the different perspectives of a wide spectrum of stake holders and experts, and imagining different possibilities and corresponding strategies, managers are better prepared for action as the future unfolds.

The American Library Association published a handbook on the scenario planning process to provide tips on writing the scenario plots for libraries.¹² Information professionals in special libraries are encouraged to apply scenario planning not only for internal library planning, but also to “help their leaders understand that they provide insight to the organization and that they don’t just catalog and warehouse data”.¹³ Bell contended that the scenario approach could be applied to achieve sustainable development of the academic libraries.¹⁴ In order to preserve its traditional core values, the library is to take up new roles as a primary change agent. To achieve this, library managers are challenged to adopt scenario planning as a strategic and learning tool to visualize alternative futures, that could be probable, possible, and most importantly, preferred, a future for them to realize. A matrix of scenarios, characterized as “failing”, “conventional”, “technocentrist” and “transformational”, was drawn to illustrate different possibilities for the future library. Bell argued that “traditional strategic planning may now be too constrained to properly respond to crisis and opportunity”. This is echoed by Hannabus when he criticized strategic planning as too focused on the present as a planning tool for a turbulent future.¹⁵ The top-down, criterion-based approach and bureaucratic inflexibility inherent in traditional strategic planning does not help today’s librarian to identify contingent decisions for unexpected changes or paradigm shifts in the information explosion age. On the other hand, the scenario development process enables conventional mindsets, existing strategies and people’s competencies to be checked against various alternative scenarios. In a nutshell, the scenario approach enables managers “to focus on opportunity-seeking planning rather than operations-driven planning”.¹⁶

Putting theories into practice, the Library of the University of Technology, Sydney applied the scenario planning process to achieve a shared understanding about its future direction.¹⁷ The University of New South Wales Library, employed the scenario modeling techniques for organizational restructuring, staff development, space planning and client services.¹⁸ In United States, the structured and disciplined techniques in developing plausible scenario was employed at the Libraries of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, to develop four possible futures to answer the question “How might the collection develop over

the next five years?”¹⁹. In Denmark, different stakeholders participated in scenario workshops to engage into “strategic reflexive conversation” on three public library development projects.²⁰ The following is a case study of how the scenario process is applied in a academic library in Hong Kong.

A library situation

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University is the largest publicly-funded tertiary institution in Hong Kong in terms of number of students, with 26,000 full-time and part-time students (or **15,116 FTE**) and an academic staff population of **1,128 FTE**. It is an institution which is quickly evolving from one with a strong focus on excellence in teaching to that with a dual purpose of teaching and research. As such it is an institution in transition. This transition is in a higher education environment which is competitive within Hong Kong but increasingly within the wider context of the fast developing Mainland Chinese institutions. Further institutional pressures are to improve its position in the global rankings of institutions. These pressures create a variety of opportunities and difficulties for any library ordinarily but more so when considering the changes which all libraries are going through in the new digital environment. The PolyU Library was dealing with this situation in three languages, English, Cantonese and Putonghua. The situation in which this well managed, staffed and resourced library was operating was complex. It needed to set new directions; it needed to determine its future with clarity; it needed to do all of this while bringing its user communities and senior university academics along on the journey. The Library staff would always be the key change agents.

The management of the Library understood the challenges facing them and elected to engage in a scenario planning process for a number of reasons. Firstly, the library wanted to engage the university community in choosing the options and directions for the future. Many changes were confronting the University was crucial that the University Management understood the opportunities focusing them with regard to the positioning of their library.

Secondly, the Library had been well managed with a long-standing management team. Early in 2007, the previous Librarian retired after 34 successful years in the position. Many of the staff had been with him for much of this period. With a new Librarian in place it was felt important at one level to validate where the library was strategically but also to test the community and the wider environment as to where the library could be.

Thirdly, the scenario planning process was an excellent opportunity to meet with the library’s community to present the issues which confronted the library and also to explore the pressures within the academic and student communities. It was hoped to gain a clearer understanding on both sides of what was desirable and what was achievable.

Fourthly, it was hoped that this process would involve all the library staff and create in this group of nearly 160 persons understanding of the library's position and the need to explore change. It was hoped to enlist all these people as agents of change as the process progressed.

What is Scenario Planning?

Scenario planning as a process is essentially about examining the range of options which constantly are with each of us and establishing stories about how those differing options could possibly come to pass. Each of us have choices to make each and every day about the way in which we travel to work, and about the way we travel home. We can change those choices whenever we will to meet changed circumstances; or just simply because we want to. Futurists such as Bruce Sterling offer perspectives on what might happen. "Futurism is an art of re-perception. It means recognising that life will change, must change, and has changed, and it suggests how and why. It shows that old perceptions have lost their validity, while new ones are possible".²¹ This evidences that we all have choices, even libraries. We can choose to do something for or to our libraries or we can choose to do nothing. But if we choose to do something there are always options. Sorting through these options will often reveal very clear choices which can be made if the organisation is going to set it's target destination which all its energies are directed toward. We might call these scenarios. Scenarios are stories of what might happen. They are essays in possibilities.

Creating scenarios for the future is not science fiction but rather the art of disconnecting oneself from the present in order to engage with a new future. This is not an easy task. "...the purpose of scenario planning is not to pinpoint future events but to highlight large-scale forces that push the future in different directions. It's about making these forces visible, so that if they happen, the planner will at least recognize them. It's about helping make better decisions today."²² One of the most important aspects to recognize that the future will happen sooner than any of us would imagine it would. Planning for change invariably involves an overestimation of the speed or the rate of change. There are many examples for libraries of this underestimation of the rate of change. One of the most notable is the speed at which digital content has become available over the Internet. It is scarcely ten years in which we have moved from no content to huge trench of information being available in this way. Looking backwards makes the change seem small indeed. Looking forward however is quite different. Even if the prediction is correct, the time frame is mostly over-estimated. The time frame seems to be much longer.

What scenario planning is not!

Strategic planning is the process of deciding the actions which an organization or group of individuals will engage in during a period. It will also include the allocation of resources (sellers, staffing and so on) in order to be able to achieve the goals set by the agreed actions. Too often the process of Strategic planning succumbs to incrementalism. The Plan is an extension of the past; is an extension on the last document; is an update of an update. This new Plan has no direction other than to continue the past, and a range of new actions are added to the Plan. In times of change such that we are traveling through, this can be disastrous in that the organization does not get a future focus; it does not get a direction in which it is heading. The direction here is a linear path from the past; it is an extension of the past rather than a considered new stretch of road. It may have a range of actions or even a huge range of actions but there is no destination for the organization; just a continuation of past directions.

Another type of strategic planning has been identified by Lugg and Fischer which they have termed task-based strategic planning.²³ While valid for the 'back-room' operations, this is also not scenario planning, although it could conceivably be used in this environment but in a different way to that which Lugg and Fischer have envisaged.

The difficulty with strategic planning is that it does not allow a separation between the thinking and the doing. The pressure is on to decide on the mission and the objectives and then to move quickly onto the actions and resourcing. A lot of time needs to be allowed to just think about options, alternatives and to think through what could be possible. Scenario Planning is the process which allows this separation.

The most important part of any plan is the destination; the destination of what and where the Library, as an organization, should be Strategic Planning as a process to accompany Scenario Planning can be thought of as back filling the destination with appropriate actions and resourcing.

Hong Kong Polytechnic University Library process

The Management Team in the Library established a Scenario Planning Working Group (SPWG) who handled all aspects of the process. They initially worked themselves through the process so that they more clearly understood what they were about to embark on. This involved reading and conducting mock exercises on how the process could and should be conducted. It was decided to involve every single member of the library staff in the under process. This was considered essential so that each staff member would have been exposed to the thinking about the future of their library. It was further decided to involve as many of the University administration, and the wider academic and student communities. The workload would be significant but it was believed that this

investment in time and energy would be worthwhile. It has to be realised that no such process had been conducted here before although the library is very well positioned in terms of its quality processes.

One of the first tasks for the SPWG was to investigate trends in libraries, publishing and higher education. Reports were prepared on the findings. The results of these analyses were used as the backbone for the subsequent presentations serving to stimulate discussion and input in the various Focus Groups. Focus groups were initially established for the professional staff and then a number of sessions for all the general grade staffs. It was considered important to conduct the general grade sessions in Cantonese to enable staff to communicate and express themselves most naturally. The professional staff sessions and all other sessions were all conducted in English. All output was translated and presented in English.

There was significant debate as to how to best and efficiently 'talk' to the academic community. It was eventually decided to establish two Expert groups. The two groups were the Expert Academic Researcher Group and the other was the Expert Academic Teaching Group. Notable staff from across the campus were invited to participate in these groups. This included both senior and high profile staff. The invitations were not considered to be representative of the various Faculties but a strong effort was made to involve as wide a group as possible. Focus Groups were also conducted with students, undergraduate and post-graduate. All in all, there were four of these serious. The Vice-Presidents responsible for these areas were also invited and attended. These Focus Groups happened over a number of busy weeks for the library and the university. All of the input from each and every group was recorded and shared both with the group and also with the SPWG. The input data would eventually form a very important component to the process, validating a number of the key directional decisions.

The ultimate step in the process was the actual Scenario Construction Workshop. This was the important workshop to work through all the input data, to establish or recognise trends and opportunities and to explore probable or possible futures. The workshop was aiming to create at least three different futures which would come to fruition in 2011. There was a specific direction for the participant not to worry about practical concerns which might stand in the way of exploring these options. The workshop was allowed the liberty of exploring the 'explored' or the 'too easily dismissed' options. The Workshop membership had some overlap with the previous Focus Groups but, for the most part, was comprised of university staff new to the process. Not only did the workshop have Vice-Presidents and Deans attending but some of the newest, brightest and innovative thinkers on campus. They were attracted not only by their interest in the library but also in their curiosity about the process.

Scenario Construction

The workshop was led by one of the author of this paper. The process will not be fully described here. The outcomes were three scenarios adjudged by the participants to represent their view of what the Library might develop into. Each scenario was different to the others in nature or in purpose. They represented different choices or destinations which the university and the library had to choose between. They were clear choices as to potential futures. The important reflection on the resulting scenarios was that if they were to be achieved there was a lot of work to be done to achieve them.

At this stage of the process, the SPWG decided to work on fleshing out the three scenarios into coherent descriptions in words of what those futures might look like. Each of the scenarios were prepared and written over an A4 page or more. They were edited and refined by the SPWG. Each of the Scenarios was given a title.

The first was termed 'The Learning Hub'. This had some of the following characteristics:

- Books co-exist with digital resources
- Change of traditional library functions
- Place for entertainment and relaxation
- Informal discussion place with the spark of ideas
- Virtual Librarian
- Librarians still important with changed role
- Need more human touch

The second Scenario was termed 'Mungabooreena 'Meeting Place''. This had some of the following characteristics:

- Carbon-neutral library
- One big night club
- Wireless everywhere
- Everybody's library
- More push for information
- Library teaches, university teaches
- Mungabooreena (Aboriginal for meeting place of people and minds)
- A cultural/learning environment
- Meets whole person development
- Artistic sensibility

The third Scenario was termed From “Wal-Mart’ to ‘Stanley’”. Walmart is to a supermarket which sells everything a consumer might ever require while ‘Stanley’ is a people’s market in Hong Kong where more specialised and locally produced goods are available and prized. This had some of the following characteristics:

- Boutique ‘Libraries’ under the one roof
- Private and public
- Librarians as curators
- Library as a bookshop
- User-initiated purchase public spaces are integrated
- Organised thematically
- Changing the boundaries
- Serving user groups differently

The SPWG then debated as to how best to proceed from here. It had been planned to take all three scenarios out to as many department and faculties with whom meetings of academic staff could be organized. It had been planned to draw comments on the three scenarios and then to produce the final scenario. After a great deal of discussion it was decided to use the input gained from the various focus groups and the Workshop in validating the shape of the Draft Preferred Library Scenario. This Draft Preferred Library Scenario was constructed by the SPWG from all the input available to it. This scenario is attached to this article.

The Preferred Library Scenario was distributed to all departments, and Faculties. The University Librarian and different library staff accompanied him to discuss with each Faculty the impact of the Scenario on the need and planning outlooks for those academic units. These discussions elicited much discussion, service opportunities and thoughts. It also revealed a very different side of the library to the academic community. The process was a very positive experience.

Characteristics of the preferred Library Scenario

The Preferred Scenario has a number of characteristics which help define its strategic impact. It became clear that there were nine key elements which described the nature and distinguishing features of the envisaged future for the library. These features arose out of the Scenario rather than creating it. These elements are:

Everywhere: Library resources and services available anywhere and everywhere

Outreach: Outreach activities extended both in depth and breadth to the university community

Social Space: Create comfortable and dynamic space conducive to problem-based learning, discussion and interaction between users

Digital Lives: Create 'Facebook' site for information searching and social exchanges

Sustainable: 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle', Library as the leader in environmental-friendly movement

Research involvement: Close collaboration with researchers. Develop and maintain an institutional repository preserving the University's research output.

Avatar Librarians: Tri-lingual Librarians providing instant help on library information and resources on screens

Print value: Strong contribution to JURA (Joint University Research Archive). Readily accessible to Hong Kong academics

Integral Contribution: The LEARNING HUB Library meets the University's teaching, research and learning needs.

The elements give a simple but sharp guide to those areas which require strategic policy formulation and action. The element *Everywhere*, for instance, is very successfully driving the Library's insistence that the University's internet security systems for off-campus access to the library's content resources be friendly for access and delivery. At this time, the access requires a clunky client to be installed before any access is possible at all. Even then it does not allow seamless and fruitful access to the Library's plentiful electronic content and wide range of services. The high level Scenario direction has focused attention and action where it was needed.

Images into Actions

Having realized Preferred Library Scenario, a word image or images of the future library began to settle in the minds of the University and Library. In order to achieve this future; in order to be able to translate the images into actions, the strategic actions or plans had to be articulated. The University Library was in effect now establishing its Strategic Plan. A Retreat was organised for all the professional staff and all the supervisory staff. The images were being turned onto the path to reality. The aim was to achieve this Scenario as a target in three years time. The Retreat itself generated five Working Groups who were charged with creating the actions and the accountabilities. They drew inspiration for many of these actions from the voluminous material and input which had been gained through the focus groups and other reactions from the library's clients. The Working Groups focused on Learning and Teaching, Research Enhancement, Collection Re-design, Physical space, and Communication and Promotion.

Conclusion

The best future for any academic library will always be achieved through good planning. Planning in times of rapid social, cultural and technological change however needs tougher tools and perspectives in order to allow for greater degrees of success.

The future in this described process is not about what the future might or will be. It is about what it is! Three years away. In doing this the Preferred Scenario can be agreed to by a community, a University Administration and delivered with well constructed strategic plans.

This process is enabling the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Library to establish plans to deal with budget targets for specific areas; collection re-design profiles; building renovations; profiles and skill requirements for the future staff; and technology deliverables. There are many others but the Preferred Library Scenario is not only an excellent marketing document but also an ambitious but achievable University Library for the Future!

Appendix

PREFERRED POLYU LIBRARY SCENARIO

The 'LEARNING HUB'

The PolyU Library in 2011 continues to be located on a land-locked campus, in the middle of one of the most densely populated parts of the world, but is now *everywhere else* at the same time. Its strong reputation for being busy is still true but it has successfully fused the information and study worlds; fused the physical and digital into one; fused locally produced and the commercially produced information for the benefit of the University research community. This is a seamless world of quality information from the web, large sets of digital books and journals as well as great collections of books. The information is now even more digital and wherever possible print materials are delivered digitally. This is what is now called the LEARNING HUB for the students and researchers. The Library has focused its services more on outreach than previously. In reaching out it is both visiting the University community wherever it is and also bringing more of that same community to the re-vitalised Pao Yue-kong Library building. In this future, the traditional functions of the Library have been re-defined and re-focused to facilitate the growth of knowledge, collaborative learning, reflective thinking and institutional visibility.

A more comfortable and dynamic learning environment has been created to achieve the best problem-based learning situation whereby students can relax in lounge-type chairs to learn in relative comfort. These new facilities also encourage discussions and interactions between students in the same and differing discipline groups. It is a meeting place of '*people and minds*' which now includes both a quality coffee shop and small bookstore. This has created a new sense of energy and excitement. Exhibitions, performances and events also make this area a cultural hub of the campus. The Library's merging of information and people has made the campus a more vibrant place. The lighting in many study carrels has now been tailored for the individual, thus creating a personalized study environment. Previous complaints about noise have been addressed in 2011 with the creation of more targeted discussions and interactive spaces. The study patterns and habits of each discipline are encouraged and supported in a library environment which has been architect re-designed with as many of the study needs in mind as possible. In all of this the Library has sought to be carbon-neutral, reducing its use of energy in many ways including programs to reduce the consumption of paper and genuinely staying electronic. The Library and its users are leaders in this movement and have adopted and embraced the motto: 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle'.

Not content with only the physical meeting spaces the Library has created new '*Facebook*'-type social spaces on the net in which information is being communicated and exchanged. Like its commercial cousin, the '*PolyU Library-book*' digital site has proven to be enormously popular as a *space* in which to navigate through in search of information. It is very relevant and in tune with the emerging groups of students who think, study and communicate very differently to the previous cohorts of students. Through this new style of library the students are finding masses of information which are both exciting and assisting their studies. The Library serves as an information gateway to staff, students, alumni and the wider community. It is difficult not to recognise the extent of the Library presence across the University. Virtual Librarians or avatars '*roam*' the Library web presences providing instant assistance. These '*Avatar Librarians*', fluent in

Putonghua, English and Cantonese, are instantly available to users on computer screens both on campus and remotely in the digital virtual information world. They have taken up the important role as information mentors. Information Literacy programs, delivered both in physical and virtual space, prepare students for research at the University level, and to become successful life-long learners.

The Library has succeeded in creating boutique web spaces for each Faculty which are friendly and responsive to discipline interests. This has been especially well received in the lead-up to the creation of the 3-3-4 program. The users from each discipline feel that they have *a space or a place* to go to where they will be directly understood as they can speak their discipline language. The physical spaces in the Library have been made more personal, more conducive to learning and less anonymous.

The Library is very cognisant of the new students and has adjusted its systems to meet these new fluencies. A reputation has been gained by the Library for its anticipatory use of future technology, communication systems and devices. The LEARNING HUB lends itself now to a more active role in assisting learning and in partnering with different learning agencies on campus such as the Educational Development Centre. Informal discussions and collaborative group work are also more effective for the different study zones which have been created within the physical fabric of the Library building with the enhancement of Level 7. Those with learning disabilities find even more support.

The information available through the Library continues to be in both print and digital although the digital resources have grown very sharply from 2007. Support of the University's research effort has been focused more in close consultation with Faculty and University policy makers. As a knowledge hub, the Library also collects all the research output of the University's Faculties and, in turn, highlights this work digitally to the University and importantly the World. The scope and richness of the important but lower-use research materials have increased markedly with the development of JURA as a HUCOM jointly-owned research repository. PolyU Library has strongly contributed to this important research centre. Hong Kong has maintained its strategic position as the regional information lighthouse. No country in this part of the world is able to match the academic resources now so readily accessible to Hong Kong academics.

This LEARNING HUB Library in 2011 is very much the kind of Library which was needed and sought by the members of the University community. They are proud of this new style of Library and the leading example it provides in Hong Kong and internationally.

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