EMBEDDED LIBRARIANS:
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN A MASSIVELY OPEN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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At first, it might seem like MOOCs and embedded librarianship aren’t compatible at all. MOOCs, or Massive Open Online Courses, are huge classes with thousands – sometimes tens of thousands – of enrolled participants. The contact of students with their instructors is limited to watching prerecorded lectures. Often, assignments are graded by computer. On the other hand, embedded librarianship means librarians developing relationships. Librarians participate in classes, get acquainted with students, and provide a personal point of contact for help and guidance with student research.
But our thesis is that if you go a little deeper, there are good reasons to think that embedded librarians are just what MOOCs need. In the next few minutes we’ll explain why.
MOOCs have been around for a few years, but the buzz about them really took off in the past year. In early November 2012, the New York Times declared the “Year of MOOCs.” Last March in Wired magazine, the academic and author Clayton Christensen predicted that higher education as we know it is "on the edge of the crevasse" – about to be disrupted by innovative approaches like MOOCs. Christensen of course is famous for his best-selling book The Innovator's Dilemma, which launched the idea of disruption in markets and technology, so his prediction got a lot of attention. Even more recently – just last November, the Times returned to the topic with another article in which Christensen in effect doubled down on his prediction that MOOCs will disrupt higher education.
Based on the number of articles and panels (including one at ALA midwinter), it’s clear that academic librarians have been paying attention. Quite a few have supported MOOCs offered by their universities. But there’s been ambivalence in attitudes, and a surprising inconsistency in roles and approaches. In engaging with MOOCs, some librarians seem to have abandoned key aspects of the library service model.
Some writers have been extremely negative about the prospects for any kind of service engagement. In an article describing his own experience with MOOCs as a librarian at San Jose State University, Bernd Becker recommended in effect that librarians hide from MOOC participants and not try to serve them. He said, "avoid supplying a librarian's direct contact information" because otherwise, librarians are swamped with questions from the hundreds of students enrolled in the course.

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--Bruce Massis

In New Library World, Bruce Massis speculated about how librarians could possibly be engaged in MOOCs. He wondered, "...who would be assigned to provide reference, research, and supplementary library instruction to tens of thousands of students enrolled in the MOOC?“

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--Jeffrey Pomerantz

In her Library Journal article about MOOCs, "Massive Open Opportunity," Meredith Schwartz quotes Jeffrey Pomerantz, a library science faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as flatly dismissing the feasibility of having librarians embedded in MOOCs. The quotation goes like this, "I haven’t heard anything about any of these platforms integrating libraries or librarians...if you're talking about embedded librarians, you'd need thousands of them."

Writing in Reference Services Review earlier this year, Kerry Wu said that "from a strictly 'access' point of view, modern academic libraries and MOOCs seem to stand on opposite sides." Wu was referring to the problem that libraries license digital materials for enrolled students and other members of their academic communities, and not for massive numbers of casual students who don't pay fees or have any relationship with their institution.

So the engagement of academic libraries in MOOCs has focused on clearing rights for instructors to use copyrighted material in their recorded lectures. There’s been less attention to making institutional information resources available to MOOC participants, and little or no attention to information literacy instruction, reference services, and research counseling.

Proffitt, M. MOOCs & libraries, slide 11.
If MOOCs are going to take over the world, and the role of librarians is relegated to clearing rights for the content of instructors’ lectures, that doesn’t seem like a very promising future for librarians in general and embedded librarians in particular.

However, we think there are two reasons to be hopeful.

First, MOOCs are bound to evolve.

Second, the real nature of embedded librarianship goes deeper than the conventional idea of librarians attending classes and getting to know the students.
We mentioned earlier that MOOCs have received a lot of “buzz” especially in the past year. But buzz is not performance. To evaluate buzz, we recommend turning to the world’s premier information technology market research company, the Gartner Group. Gartner was founded in 1979, so they have over 30 years’ experience in assessing the development of new technologies. They have heard a lot of buzz over the years.

They have created what they call the Gartner Hype Cycle. This curve says that the popular view of emerging technologies effectively goes through a series of stages. From the starting point, or technology trigger, expectations build. There is a crescendo in the buzz. The buzz gets louder until the Peak of Inflated Expectations, when some sobering facts become known, and people realize that the new technology isn’t going to save the world. Then, the buzz subsides and expectations fall, until popular opinion lands in the Trough of Disillusionment. However, a successful technology will adjust. It will develop, overcome its flaws, and come back. It finds a role in society, or business, and as it proceeds through the slope of enlightenment, and by the time it reaches the Plateau of Productivity it is delivering real value.
We think MOOCs are following this path. MOOCs have emerged gradually since 2008, when the term was first used to describe this model of online instruction. Although the “trigger” for MOOCs is hard to pinpoint, we’re inclined to point to 2011, when Stanford University launched three MOOC courses, including an artificial intelligence course taught by Sebastian Thrun that garnered lots of students, and lots of attention. Since then, the buzz has been building to the crescendo in 2013, as we showed earlier. We could say that 2013 may mark the “peak of inflated expectations”.

But lately a number of sobering facts have come to light. For example, Thrun’s company, Udacity, had a partnership with the State of California. But it’s been reported that the partnership was not successful. Only 25% of the students in the MOOC version of remedial math passed the course, compared to 52% in traditional classes.

Other data about low completion rates have also been reported. The demographics of students who enroll, and those who complete courses, suggest that while MOOCs make education accessible to nontraditional students, they don’t offer the supports that many such students need. There are individual exceptions of course, but the overall pattern seems pretty clear. So, maybe we are reaching the “Trough of Disillusionment.”

In recognition of the problems, Thrun has announced that Udacity plans to move away from MOOCs for higher education and towards delivering training content for industry. This may signal the start of the “Slope of Enlightenment” that will eventually lead MOOCs to the Plateau of Productivity. Certainly other adaptations are possible, and MOOCs may well find a role in higher education. We’re not predicting exactly how MOOCs will evolve, we’re just stating our belief that they will evolve.

Source: http://www.gartner.com/technology/research/methodologies/hype-cycle.jsp
That brings us to the second reason why we’re optimistic about the role of embedded librarians in whatever place MOOCs ultimately occupy in higher education.

As we said a few moments ago, embedded librarianship is more than getting to know the students in a class. Embedded librarianship means being integral to the teaching, research, and service missions of the university. So, librarians have to get to know, and interact with, the faculty and leadership of our institutions. As institutional leaders develop their strategies for involvement in MOOCs, librarians need to be on the leadership team.

And the reason librarians are there is to bring our unique insights to the process. In the past few years, librarians have had a great deal of success in focusing the attention of higher education on information skills, whether under the name of information literacy, information fluency, or something else. We need to insist on the same focus when it comes to implementing MOOCs as well.

When you think about it, it’s ironic that at the same time that information skills have assumed such importance, MOOCs – up to now – have completely ignored them. We hope that one aspect of the evolution of MOOCs will be to redress that omission.
OCLC Research held a workshop on MOOCs at the University of Pennsylvania last March. One of the recommendations that came out of that was to “Get the library involved.” We agree. We think that librarians need to be involved at all levels. Not just clearing copyright for lecture materials. Not just at the level of individual courses. Rather, librarians need to be involved in planning the future of MOOCs. We need to insist that MOOCs address the critical information skills of the 21st century. If we do that, then we think the future is bright for librarians to build new and stronger relationships in the educational environment of the future.

MOOCs and Libraries conference: Next Steps identified in final group discussions
And it will only happen if you make it happen. As the computer and internet pioneer Alan Kay has said, “the best way to predict the future is to invent it.”
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Slide 4: DAVOS/SWITZERLAND, 23JAN13 - Clayton Christensen, Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, USA concentrates during the televised session 'Leading through Adversity - Improving Decision-Making' at the Annual Meeting 2013 of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, January 23, 2013. . .
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