ATG interviews Don Beagle (Library Director, Belmont Abbey College, Belmont, NC)

Barbara Tierney, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
An Interview with Donald Beagle

By Barbara Tierney
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The Information Commons Handbook,
by Donald Robert Beagle with contributions
by Donald Russell Bailey and Barbara Tierney.
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Don Beagle joined the faculty of Belmont Abbey College (Belmont, N.C.) in 2000 as Director of Library Services, having previously served as Head of the Information Commons and as Associate University Librarian at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. This followed fifteen years in public library management positions, most recently as Regional Branch Head and then Head of Main Library with the Charleston County Public Library in South Carolina.

Don did his graduate work at the University of Michigan where he won the Hopwood Writing Award (1977) and was later the first recipient of NCLA's Doralyn J. Hickey Award for his first article about library technology. Don’s twenty-four published articles include "Conceptualizing an Information Commons" (1999) which Paul Conway of Duke University has called "...the seminal article that defined the core requirements of an Information Commons."

About the Handbook, Don comments: “The Information Commons Handbook explores the ongoing conversion of traditional libraries into innovative environments for learning, research, and instructional support. The Information Commons is an umbrella concept describing the physical, virtual, and cultural environment for new learning communities of students, teachers, scholars, and researchers. It is a new model for service delivery and is not about technology per se, but how an organization reshapes itself around people using technology in pursuit of learning.”.

In the Foreword of the Information Commons Handbook, Stephen Abram (Vice President, Innovation, SirsiDynix and President, Special Libraries Association) states: "The evolution of libraries is at a tipping point. Librarians can either continue on the path of technocracy or debate and implement the next generation of libraries in a new way that combines the best of past traditions with the opportunities presented by new technologies reimagined in the service of society. This book is a major contribution to this effort, following in the steps of Scott Bennett's "Libraries Designed for Learning."
Q: Are you pleased with the reaction to the IC Handbook?

Very much so. Three longtime IC managers have emailed to say they plan to use it in upcoming presentations, and one already has. That’s the toughest audience I could hope to reach. It has also been mentioned in 3 or 4 high-profile blogs, and of course the reviews in Library Journal, American Libraries, and Booklist were very positive. Mention of it has popped up in the EDUCAUSE Learning Spaces listserv, and at their “This is not a Lab” webcenter on learning space design. I have been a bit surprised, but still very pleased, by the number of medical school libraries listing it in WorldCat within four or five months after publication. I had not anticipated such immediacy of interest from that segment of the library community.

Q: In talking with longtime IC managers, certain “commons threads” or “lessons learned” emerge, as you know. What are your observations about these with regard to IC’s going into their second iteration, and can these threads and lessons be found in the Handbook?

It is fascinating to read testimonials and quotations from longtime IC managers, such as those you have collected for the upcoming ALA Editions Information Commons Case Studies. And again, I’m delighted to see how they support and reinforce the concepts and methods advocated in the Handbook. We hear many variations on the following: “The benefits of the ‘one-stop’ shop concept are remarkable.” I had tried to emphasize that concept in articles since the 90’s, but in preparing the Handbook, the question arose: is it still important to discuss this aspect, or is it “old news” by now? I decided to emphasize it again. The IC is such a multifaceted phenomenon that audiences less familiar with the details, like some top academic administrators, need a hook to hang the rest of their understandings on. The “continuum of service” or one-stop shopping, is such a hook, and the added benefit is how it then parallels the typical components of information literacy.

In another area of the lessons learned in your ALA Editions project, IC managers say “We wish we’d embedded assessment early on.” And also: “We wish we’d listened more to students,” As the handbook states in chapt. 6:“The strategic planning framework anticipates assessment by proposing standards and benchmarks for those outcomes that can then be structured with feedback loops sending usage data back into the model.” In Figure 4.1: the drawback of only doing tactical planning is that “…implementation & assessment may be compartmentalized.” The benefit of strategic planning as a precedent is that it “…incorporates or anticipates implementation & assessment.” The Handbook’s Self-Discovery step, under strategic planning, offers a way to embed assessment from the starting gate in a way that also incorporates student input at the earliest IC planning stages. It does this with surveys and focus groups that perform dual functions, becoming both planning and assessment tools. And as chapter 10 points out, focus groups can ultimately help promote the third function of community building. It is really striking how many IC managers who started their IC’s in the 90’s are now saying things like the following quote from “Information Commons Case Studies”: We would try to insert, at strategic points in the planning process, a fuller discussion of assessment issues. A more systematic, continuing analysis would ensure that we are asking the most appropriate
questions at the right time. And: “We would begin the Commons with an evaluation program already in place before opening. We are just now beginning to delve into that issue and it seems to be harder now that things have already been going for over two years. We would begin the evaluation at opening and thus have data to support changes that are made.”

One specific example of how to tie planning to assessment is to specifically direct scenario-building toward learning outcomes. There are lots of books about scenario-building and its role in strategic planning, but surprisingly, a dearth of discussion about framing those scenarios around learning outcomes. This is a big area that I didn’t even have space to properly address in the Handbook, but at least the examples in those chapters will hopefully provide a starting point.

But the Handbook does not offer pat, simplistic formulas. One librarian in early IC planning stages asked about staffing for multimedia labs, and expressed surprise that we haven’t developed a basic rule for number of staff per 100 workstations. Anyone who looks for that sort of equation in the Handbook will be disappointed. You might be able to estimate a number of basic IT student assistants needed in a basic commons area, based on a discoverable bell curve, but the context of multimedia invokes a range of issues unique to each campus. How many faculty have begun replacing term papers with multimedia projects? How many majors require students to compile IT Portfolios, and what percentage of these portfolios entail multimedia? Do these students receive any multimedia training within their major courses, or are they expected to fend for themselves or roam the campus seeking help? Do the faculty get IT and media support within their departments, or are they also roaming the campus seeking help? When you start factoring in all these elements, unique to each campus, you’ll understand why there’s no easy shortcut to predicting the staffing needed per 100 multimedia workstations. But again, look at Figures 4.11 through 4.17 in the Handbook: those Q&A formats address those specific questions about multimedia. If you do those surveys and focus groups framed around those types of questions, you will gather the data you need to make an informed judgment about multimedia staff support. That same chapter also advocates tracking what Catherine Sheldrick Ross calls “unmonitored referrals.” If your library is still in its pre-IC stage, any complex multimedia queries hitting your reference desk may be quietly turning into unmonitored referrals. It only takes a few of these to signal a much larger need or range of needs that is slowly (or quickly) coming up over the horizon.

What is your current thinking about the 3 levels of the Commons?

In the 1999 “Conceptualizing…” article, I noted that the term Information Commons was being used in library discussions both on physical and virtual levels, and it was important to explicitly state and clarify the distinction, because one justification for the physical IC is that it becomes a conduit or access point to the virtual commons. As years passed, I noticed that people kept quoting and citing that comment, so in preparing a presentation
for TRLN in 2005 I extended it from 2 levels to the 3 levels. At that time, I termed them **physical, virtual, and creative** commons. I left it at that until the CIC-PKAL conference in Memphis in early 2006, when I saw a presentation by Paul Hagner, VP of EDUCAUSE. Paul included those same 3 levels in his presentation, and he also labeled them physical, virtual, and creative. But while his slide was patterned after my slide for TRLN, his graphic was an improvement on my original diagram. So seeing my slide presented back at me like that started me thinking again about the term “creative commons.” For one thing, it intruded on the identity of the “CreativeCommons.Org” as a specific licensing entity.

One alternative that some have tried using is the **“social commons.”** But in weighing the use of “social” versus “cultural,” I looked at parallel usages, such as “social occasion” and “cultural occasion.” A social occasion can be nearly anything, like a wedding reception, that doesn’t intrinsically touch on content related to creativity, intellectual property, or fair use. But “cultural occasions” seem to me to be a subset of social occasions that do revolve around content related to creativity and intellectual property: gallery openings, theatrical productions, music recitals, poetry readings. I simply don’t think “social commons” or “creative commons” work as effective descriptors. So that is how the three levels: **physical, virtual, and cultural,** came to be labeled. It seemed worthwhile to spend that sort of time and attention on those basic terms because I truly believe the three levels will be increasingly relevant to future thinking about information literacy, and even beyond that, certain aspects of learning theory and pedagogy.

**Describe how a 'cutting edge' IC might look/function 5 years down the road.**

It is a tough question, because the IC is meant to be innovation-friendly, and innovation is never wholly predictable. Some future developments are extrapolations of current trends, and for those, it is possible to make some rough forecasts. But the future always also contains an element of genuine novelty, and novelty is, by definition, unpredictable. We’re going to see more innovations in pedagogy and in multimedia technology, and both will be driven by fresh waves of NetGen students and increasingly tech-savvy faculty. I personally think within five years Information Commons will tend to evolve toward Learning Commons; that is, their reach will extend beyond the library in the form of collaborative relationships with other campus innovators. Then we will see some universities that replicate these LC’s across campus, as in the recent announcement made over the INFOCOMMONS-L listserv from the University of Melbourne. In terms of online delivery, I think the first big wave of course management systems adoption has peaked, so there will be less attention given to CMS bells and whistles and more attention given to quality content, and how that translates into learning outcomes. I think we will also see a steady gain of interest in matching multimedia modalities to learning styles: visual and auditory, and we will gradually come to understand that there is an inherent
linkage between learning styles and information seeking behaviors. We’ll be increasingly able to predict, based on assessment tools like the Meyers-Briggs, whether students will tend to be fast surfers or deep divers as researchers. I think more faculty will come to see the advantages of having search-and-retrieval tools embedded in courseware and online content, so that information seeking behaviors and learning styles can be better aligned. And I think that within five years the whole issue of what I call “metabrowsing” will become more important, though I don’t know exactly how that might play out. I use metabrowsing in the Handbook to describe the discovery process used by faculty when roaming through subject-classified book collections, scoping out the lay of the land, as it were, and assessing the range of titles available in a topic. Somehow, we will need to find a way to more effectively bring metabrowsing to the digital domain. It will probably take an innovation in user interface design, possibly through video gaming, to make that happen.

How do you envision the role of an "IC Librarian" (with regard to academic faculty, students) 5 years down the road.

That depends on whether the Commons “subsumes” the library, and the library comes to be viewed as the subsidiary unit within a larger Commons organization. In the forthcoming Information Commons Case Studies book one IC manager has stated: “The success of the IC affects the design and use of the library as a whole. For example, the library reference area was redesigned to reflect the openness and fluidity of the IC. Instead of hosting the IC, the library ends up being subsumed by it. The IC melds over time with the rest of the library and comes to characterize the entire building.”

Currently, the typical job ad you see has a Library Director advertising for a “Head of the InfoCommons.” We might someday see the roles reversed, and the Director of the InfoCommons advertising for a subordinate titled “Head of the Library.” Partly I suspect this will depend on how ongoing use of the book collection shakes out as Google Book Search slowly builds its content database. I personally think we are still in the period where the “Age of Print” overlaps the Digital Era. Books are still very much with us, and properly so, which means that the traditional role of the library as “parent” organization to the Commons will continue for at least awhile. But we are obviously living in a time when major shifts can occur with unexpected speed.

Is Google Book Search going to have the huge impact on scholarship that some are predicting?

If it survives legal challenges, and I suspect that some accommodations will be worked out, then it will have a massive impact on those areas of traditional scholarship that have relied on huge print collections spanning the past few centuries: historical research, literary studies, and so forth. I have just finished co-authoring a new book on the Civil War poet Abram Ryan, Poet of the Lost Cause, to be published by University of Tennessee Press late this year or early next. We made major discoveries in researching Ryan by way of Google Book Search and other fulltext databases like Documenting the American South. In fact, those database discoveries are a key factor that sets our book
apart from the earlier academic biography of Ryan, *Furl That Banner*, by David O’Connell. Let me give you just one example that hints at the huge potential of Google Book Search.

In his book, O’Connell cites a 1950’s biography of General Beauregard that claims the general gave a speech with Ryan in Nashville in February 1862. O’Connell dismisses this as a myth, because that Beauregard biography offered no solid documentation to back up the claim, and O’Connell found no other sources mentioning that speech. But when I did a Boolean search on RYAN and NASHVILLE in *Documenting the American South*, up popped another account of this speech, by an eyewitness no less, named Julia Morgan. Morgan’s description of this speech was buried in a book first published in 1896, decades before the biography of Beauregard was written. Julia Morgan’s account had remained undiscovered by Ryan researchers, including O’Connell, simply because her book was never indexed! Then I ran the same search in Google Book Search, and up popped yet another account of the Ryan-Beauregard speech in a book by Robert Selph Henry, also published before the biography of General Beauregard. Henry’s book had been indexed, but very poorly, so that Ryan’s name never appeared in the index. So in this example we see where one significant historical event—a public event, no less, on a stage in a major southern city during wartime—was virtually lost to history because the first book to mention it was never indexed and the second was poorly indexed. We can be sure that this problem of inadequate indexing and overlooked references repeats itself hundreds of thousands of times.

But the Ryan research also revealed some current weaknesses in Google Book Search. The copyright restrictions cause much content to be available only in “snippets,” rather than as fullpage text excerpts. This can become incredibly maddening. In one case, a snippet stated: “Ryan caused a sensation at the banquet when he stood up and…” And WHAT? End of snippet! Because the source was an old bound journal not available on ILL, I then had to drive 150 miles to a library that held that journal, just to see whether this “sensational” incident was even worthy of consideration for our book. My gas money and car mileage obviously didn’t help the copyright owner one iota. I should not have to drive a hundred miles, or buy an entire old volume from an out-of-print dealer, neither of which helps the copyright owner, to read three more sentences about what Ryan said at that banquet that caused such a sensation. If we are going to enforce copyright under the notion that the financial interest of creators should be protected, then we need a rational mechanism for enabling proportional compensation. I would suggest the idea of what I call a “snippet jukebox.” Next to each snippet, Google could place a clickable payment button at some prorated level, say 10 cents a word, that would allow a researcher to specify a custom chunk of text for “purchase” and downloading. Monies flowing from the snippet jukebox could then actually go to copyright holders, not to Alibris or the local Qwik Mart gas station. In some ways, it would be a solution that parallels the resolution of Napster music downloading. By the way, there are tricky little ways to tweak a search so as to enlarge or extend a snippet, but I did not realize this at the time. And in any case, my point about the snippet jukebox is still valid because those searching tricks may be dis-enabled by Google as they refine their interface. I have run into some of the copyright protection mechanisms OCLC has placed in the Netlibrary e-book collection and they
seem applicable to the issue of snippet expansion. While they’re certainly not perfect, they may point the way toward some future accommodations that might be worked out for Google Book Search.

**What will the "next big thing" be (technologically) for ICs?**

I’m really taken with the RENCI DisplayWall at UNC-Chapel Hills Health Sciences Library. Its capabilities turn out to be very congruent with the multifaceted roles of a Learning Commons. It has the physical scope to enable review of broad patterns and wide-ranging phenomena, and yet the power of high-definition resolution to probe small elements of detail within those patterns. I think it has the potential to be an extraordinary tool for group process learning. Plus when combined with the AccessGrid for virtual realtime conferencing, it introduces the aspect of extended communities of learning.

**What about The Commons as an arena for combined academic-social activities? Social Networking in the Commons?**

In my recent consulting visit to a university in New England, I made a presentation to a group of institutional Vice Presidents, and a comment was made about my reference to comfortable chairs in a Learning Commons. For a prospective grant proposal, this person asked, could this be restated as something like “conversation ergonomics?” Actually, this was a great question that goes beyond writing an impressive-sounding grant proposal. The area of conversational and social ergonomics is related to a small but growing body of research literature. One thread of this research came out of studies of students (usually younger than college age) visiting museums with their families, and the role that parent-child conversations, and peer-to-peer conversations among the students, play in learning within the museum environment. Whereas museums tend to have semi-permanent physical exhibits, the Learning Commons can be used (by faculty) as a constantly changing quasi-museum, with virtual exhibits stored in large classified learning object repositories, and called up on multimedia platforms by students individually or in small groups, with the specific goal of prompting thematic learning conversations among the students. And to return to your previous question, the DisplayWall would be an idea tool for group access to multimedia learning objects. Many researchers implicitly anticipate, accept, and welcome a socializing component to these learning conversations, which illustrate the importance of space ergonomics and seating for making this possible.

**Much of your writing has come from your role as head of the IC at UNC-Charlotte. Why did you move from a large university like UNCC to small Belmont Abbey College?**

In the digital era, for me at least, much of the cache has drained out of the large library mystique. Through FTE-based sliding scales and consortium licensing, small libraries can loom a good deal “larger” in the digital domain than they ever could in the realm of print collections. This 1950’s era building I work in was sort of an ugly duckling to many
visiting librarians, but I saw it differently. I realized that it could become a better environment for enabling student use of technology than for shelving a large print collection. Since we see a trend toward offsite storage, compact shelving, downsized in-house collections and so forth, I felt that this type of building had unrealized potential. I might add, when the Chronicle of Higher Education sent a reporter and an architect around the state to review historic campuses in North Carolina, they were quite taken with this library building. Their comments in the Chronicle article mentioned the front porch area, but their observations during their campus visit went well beyond that.

I was also intrigued by the possibility of doing some research I had only dreamed about at UNCC, but in an environment where stronger ratios allow sharper differentiation of impacts. What I mean by this is that a small college can enjoy a higher ratio of staff to FTE and workstations to FTE than can a large university. That means that the impact of a new service delivery model can be measured more quickly and definitively because those ratios can throw the impact into sharper relief. The Scholastica Project, which applied an XML-based knowledge visualization schema to an experimental OPAC, was conducted entirely at Belmont Abbey College, and resulted in a D-LIB article that still draws a good deal of attention. I think having more workstations and staff per FTE translated into more immediately measurable impacts for that project on its internal community of users than would have been the case at UNCC. Of course, ironically, now the Charlotte Research Institute at UNCC is getting into knowledge visualization research.

What also impressed me about Belmont Abbey was its sense of collegiality and community. Some people think collegiality is mere froth on the surface of professionalism, and easily disregarded. I disagree. Collegiality is the foundation of professionalism. It is the equivalent of Professionalism 101. If you as a librarian are not committed to courtesy toward all faculty and students, and to collegiality toward your colleagues, even those who disagree with you, then don’t waste my time by applying for a job where I am director, because you won’t last long anyway. That sense of community also interests me from the point of view of communities of learning and scholarship. Belmont Abbey is a functioning monastery, as well as a college. Benedictine monasteries have a fascinating history, as Peter Burke comments in his book, A Social History of Knowledge. Burke points out that Benedictine abbeys were pioneering the notion of learning communities and collaborative scholarship a full millennium before the invention of printing. So that brings a unique perspective to this time we now live in, when two great, long-term eras called the Age of Print and the Digital Age, are grinding against each other like huge tectonic plates.