

When library DNA goes bad

The LIS profession is one where most of us become librarians by accident, often after other careers. So how can we claim that LIS workers are born not made? That the secret to success pounds through our DNA and is recognised in our genes?

Librarianship is a magpie trade. We tawl and plunder from different occupations—teaching, retail (booksellers in particular), and plump our nests with shiny precedents set by others. So why not nick some DNA while we're at it, so long as our amalgams don't go wrong?

The 1986 horror movie remake *The Fly* saw the DNA of the main human character fused with the DNA of a fly in an experiment gone bad. An awful creature is created as a result. But what does a hybrid man-fly have to do with libraries?

Bad DNA. In medicine bad DNA is associated with lymphoma type cancers and viruses like smallpox. In movies it most often results in the demise of the genetically-wonky mutant. And in libraries, while there are some terrific initiatives in the cross-fertilisation of the library with say, the hospital

or the café, we need to take care that we do not transform so much as to become unrecognisable.

In DNA fingerprinting forensics, miniscule debate questions whether fingerprints are unique. But with DNA in general, and fingerprints in particular, both are unique enough; at least, unique enough for species identification. Libraries – and library and information professionals – often do our utmost to morph into any identity but the one with the 'L' word. Yet our DNA gives us away.


Libraries and library and information workers should celebrate our distinctive markers. No matter what we do, we can't hide them. Maybe giraffes yearn to be alligators, but you know what? Not going to happen.

For several years some libraries have modelled their layout on those of bookstores, both in how books are grouped together and with the inclusion of a café. Yet Borders bookstores collapsed in 2011. Perhaps libraries too need to re-think: What is it we do that separates us from the bookshop?

Academic libraries offer multiple electronic resources, perhaps like Amazon.com, and space for students to gather. What is it we do that separates us, our services, from a website or a community hall? Though we fuse well with these examples, let's not discount nor apologise for what we, the library and information services profession, can uniquely provide – such as equitable and long-tail access to resources.

My plea? Let's not alter our DNA so much we transform into a human-fly crossbreed that gets its brutal comeuppance in the final scenes. If we want to stick around in the 21st century, let's separate out – and celebrate – the DNA sequences that make us LIS workers and workplaces, regardless of whether we're born this way or if we have the DNA strands spliced in later.

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