

# Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Research

## Our Stories Transforming Our Libraries

### *The York County Library System*

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These narratives chronicle the authors' journeys to collaborate and discover the transformative impact that stories have on library culture and library staff. This study describes a research collaboration between York County Libraries and Penn State York. In Phase I, we collected stories from library staff as the library system was being challenged to reimagine public libraries for the future. The major themes and types of organizational stories identified in the initial narrative project were presented during a county-wide all-staff in-service training. The library District Consultant (first author) and the Penn State professor (second author) then facilitated a workshop designed to lead staff in their exploration of these topics and generate a written record of their storytelling/discussions. This data became the basis for Phase II of the project and allowed the system to strategically assess its evolving culture and identity.

### Mina's Story

Having worked in public libraries for nearly 20 years, I have witnessed and been affected by many shifts in the library community. I recognized as I moved from support staff into leadership that it can be difficult to communicate nuances in policies and procedures clearly and consistently to all staff members. Not all attempts at communication are accurately received, because of barriers in the workplace. Differing staff needs and motivations, experience levels and knowledge of societal change can prevent the message from being received. Creating and communicating vision during times of profound change can prove even more challenging, especially when new concepts and uncertainty are involved.

In 2008, funding for public libraries in Pennsylvania was cut drastically. As a result, many programs, services and even hours were reduced. In York County, the number of holds available to library members was greatly reduced. I recall a conversation I had with a concerned library staff member at the front desk.

“How can we stop providing materials that people want? They will just stop using the library,” the staff person asked with aggravation.

“We are not reducing the resources available to our patrons, but are requiring them to wait longer for some popular materials,” I responded. “With cuts in our ability to purchase new materials, we need to reduce the numbers of duplicate items purchased, and are making access to these materials more freely available to all members.”

“But that’s not fair to our regular users, homeschool families, seniors and shut-ins” he replied, obviously not satisfied with my answer.

I explained that a strategic decision had been made and our responsibility was to support that decision. “We want our users to experience the reality of what reducing funding to libraries means to them as individuals. We want them to experience the impact of losing libraries and what library services mean to the community.”

“But people are mad and complaining to me!” he said, again in an irritated tone.

I could see that the impact of this change was clearly hitting our staff. I calmly reiterated the message, “Your task at the desk is to hear the complaint and then help refocus that anger on the politicians in Harrisburg, not at the library system. That is why we have prepared talking points for every staff member. It is also why we have provided a mechanism to help library users contact their state representatives to express their concern.”

As the above vignette illustrates, the change of policy and procedure required education and a change in communication patterns for the front line staff. Building the scaffolding necessary to enable staff to successfully shift patterns of thinking and modify entrenched actions requires time and a clear message. I learned that the strategic planning process for the library system can serve as that scaffolding.

I personally enjoy the strategic planning process and see its value. My voice, combined with other entrepreneurial and visionary leaders, can create amazing possibilities. Leadership, especially during strategic planning, has the ability to focus on opportunities rather than problems. Leaders can introduce change by exploring opportunities while at the same time preserving employee trust by balancing change and continuity (Drucker, Senge, Hesselbein, & Peter F. Drucker Foundation, 2001). I have worked at all levels within the library. I understand the needs of typical library users. As district consultant, I have the vital role of balancing the needs of different libraries and communities in the system and to help manage that change process.

In 2011, one of the key issues addressed in the York County Library System long-range strategic plan was what will librarians do in the future, and how do we prepare our libraries for that role? Included in that plan were the objectives of helping our staff fully understand the five literacies as presented by PA Forward--a statewide initiative of the Pennsylvania Library Association and launching a countywide education program on the five literacies. This is a major conceptual change, as it requires moving the idea of libraries from being book repositories to being community institutions that empower each community member’s personal growth while simultaneously elevating the quality of life for all Pennsylvanians. The five literacies on which PA Forward focuses are Basic Literacy, Information Literacy, Civic and Social Literacy, Health Literacy, and Financial Literacy (Pennsylvania Library Association, 2016).

In 2012, York County began exposing library leadership to concepts regarding the *Library of the Future* as delineated in the strategic plan process (Weber, 2011). At an open forum attended primarily by library leaders and system board members, Jaime La Rue, then-Director of the Douglas County Libraries in Colorado, discussed the role of e-books in libraries, weeding collections to provide what users want, and getting librarians out of the building and into their communities. A few months later, Garry Golden, professional futurist, offered his insight into future trends, and how libraries can be prepared to meet the changes forecast in his talk. His audience consisted of library directors, board members, and leadership from across the county. Finally, Joan Frye Williams, a nationally-known library

consultant, shared her thinking at a staff in-service training. In her talk, Williams indicated that libraries will move from being “agencies of information” to becoming “facilitators of transformation” for people throughout their lives.

System leadership had been gathering information about these change processes, incorporating them into our thought patterns, and creating a shared vision for the future of York County Libraries. We as individual library leaders chose to ‘catch the vision,’ remove conceptual and material boundaries, and create the dynamic needed to change (Senge, 2004, p. 43). The heart of building shared vision, after all, “is the task of designing and evolving ongoing processes in which people at every level of the organization, in every role, can speak from the heart about what really matters to them and be heard” (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994, p. 299). The challenge remained to design training and communication to share our vision with library staff.

Now I was excited. I love change! I love a challenge! When I am presented with new ideas and possibilities, I tend to change from being an introvert, sitting on the sidelines and absorbing information and concepts, into a cheerleader. When asked during the strategic planning process, “Can you help communicate the *Library of the Future* to library staff?” I quickly realized that I could. Because I can identify each of those staff members with myself at different points in my career, I felt I understood their needs to understand and to be invited into the process of creating the *Library of the Future*. I responded, “Yes, I think I can.” At that point I was given leadership of the strategic goal of preparing our staff to see and support the library as a learning place and information resource for life transitions, as well as the strategic objective to describe the library as a “learning place” and develop a program of learning for the *Library of the Future*.

It is interesting now to note that in 2012, as a precursor to the *Library of the Future* strategic planning process, library staff members across York County were surveyed to assess their current attitudes, values and beliefs about the library culture (Weber, 2013). Survey results indicated that staff members clearly believed people are drawn to libraries primarily because of the resources, services, and programs libraries offer, not because of their atmosphere or potential roles as community hubs or meeting places. This indicated to me that a process needed to be designed that would, over time, transform that basic belief held by library staff. This was an opportunity to create a new shared vision for library leadership, all staff members, and library volunteers. However, the ability to communicate these changes to the public would require providing new language regarding libraries and their role to every member of library staff, and supporting staff efforts to incorporate this language into their interactions with the public. Our 2012 staff in-service day training was the first step in this process. At this training, most frontline staff and many managers were introduced to these concepts for the first time.

Soon after this training, I created a webinar using Prezi, a screen capture video tool, and Survey Monkey to create and reinforce the concepts introduced and relate these concepts to the strategic planning process. All county library staff were required to view the webinar and answer a survey to qualify for Continuing Education (CE) credits. This reinforced a major philosophical change at York County Libraries. Libraries are no longer just about books; they are about education and learning. Our communities value education, so libraries can no longer simply read stories to little children: we must prepare children and their parents for the future. I wanted all staff to see that libraries provide the space and place for programs and connections to community organizations.

One of the follow-up survey questions encouraged staff to communicate library transformation stories. My favorite was related by a staff member at Kaltreider-Benfer Library in Red Lion. He recalls a mother coming into the library and requesting a library card for her daughter. As the young girl learned to read, she attended summer reading programs, chose new books to read, and learned about new series and authors that might interest her. She worked on reports at the library for school projects. While in high school, she also researched colleges and completed her FAFSA using library computers. While in college, during her spring and winter breaks, she used the library’s resources to find materials for research projects. Eventually, she celebrated her college graduation. His next recollection of this young woman was checking out books to plan her wedding and decorate her new apartment. She

regularly came in for reading materials, and then she asked about books on childbirth and parenting. His last interaction with her was placing holds on books about breastfeeding her new child. This staff person hoped to be there to give her child her/his first library card.

This story is the perfect representation of the library being used at different life stages. This is the embodiment of the concept of the *Library of the Future*: helping people transition as they transform their lives. As Marek describes in her book, *Organizational Storytelling for Librarians*, this type of story is called a “sacred bundle story” (2011, p.17). This type of story can be used as a powerful strategic planning tool since it reveals the values and norms embedded within an organization’s collective identity. In this case, stories such as these help to create the shared vision that libraries are now about transforming people’s lives and not just serving as information sources. This story produces an emotional connection to a patron and reinforces the idea that library staff are change agents.

In 2014, I was introduced to strategic storytelling through training sessions held by the State Library of Pennsylvania. In partnership with Michael Margolis, *The Library Story: Strategic Storytelling Toolkit for Public Libraries* (2015) was created. This created in me a desire to collect library stories like the one related above. I could use them in York County to tell our story to our community, stakeholders, and to determine how our library staff had integrated the training information into their professional lives. It became apparent to me that organizational storytelling (Boje, 2008) was integral to our change process. Not long after this session, I met with my former communication professor, Deborah Eicher-Catt. She had worked with me when I was an undergraduate, helping me to submit an article to *The Kentucky Journal of Communication*. We had always talked about wanting to collaborate in the future. I was excited to describe to her our strategic plans and the value of storytelling to the process.

## Deborah’s Story

It’s late Friday morning in early summer 2014, and as I prepare to meet my former student, Mina Edmondson, for lunch at the downtown farmer’s market, I can’t help but wonder how her new position in the library has been going for her. She is now District Consultant for York and Adams Counties. When I had Mina as an undergraduate student, she was working in the library at the time. As I recall, I supervised an independent study with her in organizational communication where she applied her learning to the library context. I am anxious to hear what projects she is working on and what her daily work-life now entails. I knew when she was an adult learner that she was destined to find ways to make a difference in her world. So, I was not surprised when I heard that she had completed her M.L.S. and was hired full-time in a coveted staff position for the local library system.

As I scurry into the market, I immediately see her at a lunch table. After initial greetings and ordering our meals, a lively conversation ensues about life’s events—both personal and professional. At one point, Mina begins to discuss a library storytelling project she had just begun in earnest. She had attended some training sessions by national library consultant, Michael Margolis, called “GetStoried.” She explained that the goal of the training was to teach library personnel how to collect stories from staff and administrators (Margolis, 2015). Given my own interests in the communicative dimensions of narratives, I was immediately intrigued. She told me she was learning about how important narratives can be for helping library personnel strategize about how to respond to the changing nature of library culture brought about by the digital age.

My interest was piqued at hearing the key words: “narratives,” “change,” and “culture.” “That is fascinating,” I replied. I described how my discipline of communication is also interested in narratives, given that they are considered to be a vital way in which people make sense of their worlds (Bruner, 1990; Fisher, 1984). When analyzed, narratives also reflect the cultural worlds from which they come. So, theorists of organizations (like libraries) have long appreciated how stories can reveal a great deal about what an organization believes, what it values, and the attitudes its members hold toward the world (Bartlett, 2011).

“This is exactly what the GetStoried training was about,” Mina replied with excitement. The training encouraged libraries to collect, share, and analyze their own stories so they can better adapt to the changing needs of their communities.

After talking about these ideas for a while, it suddenly occurred to both of us that we might have a collaborative opportunity in the making, something we had both mentioned in the past. What a serendipitous moment it was! Given that I was scheduled to teach communication research methods in the fall, I told Mina I could easily make our focus on narrative methodology. I could have my students actually interview library personnel and collect stories for her from around the county.

“Could you actually do that?” Mina asked.

I replied with an emphatic “Yes.” As I described, I could design my fall course as a “service learning” course, a mode of pedagogy that Penn State encourages. It is a way for students to learn course material by actually applying their new knowledge in real-world community settings. I thought working with the library system would be a great learning opportunity for my students.

Mina agreed that the idea sounded like a win-win situation. While she had done a short in-service training with staff and collected some transformational stories, having so many more stories from library staff throughout the system would benefit the system greatly in reimagining libraries for the future. And so our collaboration began. We used our remaining lunch time brainstorming what we wanted to accomplish and how to get started. We both knew that fall semester 2014 was right around the corner.

As I was driving home from lunch that day, I was pleased at the prospect of establishing a genuine collaboration with the library system. I couldn’t help but recall the significance my early library experiences in my small hometown in Michigan had on me. I was drawn to my little local library and absolutely loved being there. I remember walking on my own at an early age the two blocks from home to find books to read—especially during the summer. Given that I grew up in a lower-middle class family, my parents didn’t have the money to buy me many books. I’ve often thought, as I moved on in my educational path, that those early experiences of going to the library meant more to me than I perhaps had originally acknowledged. Those experiences made a lasting impression, instilling in me a love for learning and setting me on a life course I couldn’t have imagined so long ago. “I wonder what the library means to all the people who actually get to work there,” I thought as I pulled into my driveway.

## Our Initial Project Design

Over the course of the summer, we met several times to design and coordinate our efforts. We knew we wanted to collect data through qualitative interviewing and storytelling that reflected current understandings of the library system culture, in order to assist the system’s strategic goal of reimagining libraries for the future. We also wanted to provide Penn State undergraduate communication students the opportunity to learn about qualitative research and narratology (the study of narratives) through first-hand experience in the field, where the outcomes of their efforts could make a real difference to the county library system. We decided to interview as many personnel as possible from the 13 libraries within the system. We also thought it was important to interview and collect stories from different types of personnel, for example, front-desk staff, children’s library staff, and administrators. We classified the libraries based upon the total membership (cardholders), collection size, and circulation as reported in the *Pennsylvania Public Library Data Collection* (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). We also brainstormed the types of questions we would ask personnel, resulting in our final interview protocol, consisting of eleven open-ended questions (see appendix A). These questions solicited narratives of various types and provided the opportunity for personnel to describe their work experiences and their perceptions of the library culture as a whole.

It was decided that the 13 students enrolled in Deborah's research class would each digitally record interviews from three personnel, transcribe the interviews, and create typed transcripts for future thematic analysis.

As fall semester approached and our plans solidified, we made a presentation about the planned service-learning initiative at a quarterly library meeting attended by system-wide directors. We were able to field any initial questions about the study and, most importantly, solicit the cooperation of all personnel involved in the project, since each interview would take library staff approximately 30-45 minutes of their time. At this meeting, it was also explained that the primary responsibility of securing volunteers from the various libraries rested with Deborah and the student research team, comprised of the 13 undergraduate students from her research class. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants. We also informed potential interview subjects that the data would be collected in a way that would preserve their anonymity, in regard to Mina and others involved in the research initiative. These efforts became what we eventually named Phase I of our study. Deborah sought approval for the research from Penn State's Institutional Review Board, and the study was classified as "exempt," given its proprietary focus.

In Phase I, 113 staff personnel throughout the system were identified as potential interview subjects. During the fall semester 2014, the Penn State students interviewed 25 of these 113 staff members (22%). Of the 25 administrative personnel in the system, the students collected data from 13 individuals (52%), for a total of 38 employees. Of the 13 libraries within the system, students were able to visit and collect narratives from 12, a surprisingly high number. In this phase of the study, branch and regional/member libraries were represented equally, at six each. Across the system, these 12 libraries included five small (under 80,000 circulation/year), four medium-sized (under 200,000 circulations/year), and three large-sized libraries (over 200,000 circulations/year).

While the students were taught how to qualitatively analyze their collected data (and presented these preliminary findings to us at the end of fall 2014 semester), the data was not fully analyzed by us until the following year, during summer and fall 2015. Deborah secured a Penn State Advisory Board Grant which supported a teaching course release for fall 2015. This allowed us the opportunity to carefully analyze the data for recurring themes or patterns. From Phase I of our collaboration, we produced "Reimagining Public Libraries as Learning Communities: What Library Stories Can Tell Us" (Edmondson & Eicher-Catt, 2016). In addition to reporting on the inception of our collaboration, its design, and implementation, in this article we reveal what our collected stories tell us about this library system's organizational change process. In particular, in response to our interview question, "What does the library mean to you?" we identified some major themes that represent the embodied values of the institutional culture, and reflect its collective identity. These themes were: 1) the ideals of freedom and stability, 2) the maintenance of democratic values, 3) the importance of nurturing social connections, 4) an appreciation for life-long learning, and 5) the all-encompassing experience created by engaging in such a vital point of contact with the local community. We also found staff members were experiencing an overriding tension between maintaining traditional values of library culture and the need for libraries of the future to innovate and change.

## The Evolution of Phase II of our Project

### Deborah's story

In spring 2016, Mina contacted me. The York County libraries were having an All Staff In-service Day Training on May 6, and they wanted us to be keynote speakers. I quickly agreed, given that such an event provided us with the opportunity to share the results of Phase I. As Mina acknowledged, "I want to make our presentation accessible to all of our staff. I want them to see their own stories and take ownership of the information we present."

Given our hour and a half time allotment, we decided that we would engage the audience more directly in the storytelling process. It was also a great opportunity to collect more data, since well over 100 people would be attending. And so, Phase II of our collaborative project began. We met several times before the May in-service training. We put together a PowerPoint presentation which gave an overview of Phase I. More importantly, we brainstormed about what additional stories we wanted to collect. We decided to design the workshop component of our time as a small group activity. We wanted to focus on some of the initial questions we posed to Phase I participants, and also explore in more detail the themes we discovered. This in-service training would provide a wonderful opportunity to ask library personnel to share their stories not only with us but also with each other, in an informal setting.

We were committed to creating time during the in-service training for oral reporting out from small group discussions from the library staff themselves. We also asked every group to produce a written record of their discussions that would give us more data to analyze later. Therefore, after our initial overview of Phase I, we broke the audience of 114 staff members into groups of five to seven members, trying to disperse everyone in a fashion that allowed them to meet and discuss ideas with people with whom they did not regularly work. We gave each group a pen and paper, and asked for a group volunteer to serve as the recorder. We told them we were going to review the themes we found in *their stories*, along with some other questions, and asked them to discuss these in their groups. We gave groups about 5 to 7 minutes to discuss and record each question or prompt. We then asked for a volunteer from 2 or 3 groups to come forward and report to the entire group as a whole what their discussion/storytelling had revealed.

The prompts and/or questions we posed during the in-service were: 1) Please share your first library experiences; 2) What was significant about those experiences? and 3) What does the library mean to you? Following Marek (2011), we knew that these types of initial prompts/questions would generate “who I am and why I am here” type stories. This type of story, when shared orally among organizational members, can be beneficial in grounding members’ attitudes, values, and beliefs in the identity of the organization as a whole.

After giving participants time to share these stories, we moved on, in order to more fully explore the themes that emerged from our Phase I data. We thus proceeded to ask: 4) Why do you think the library represents the ideals of freedom and stability?; 5) Why do you think it is important for libraries to maintain democratic values?; 6) Regarding nurturing social connections, what activities are happening in your library as examples of this change in thinking about libraries?; 7) Regarding life-long learning, describe how working in the library has changed you; 8) What would the ideal library of the future look like—if we had...increased funding, increased space, increased technology, increased...?; and 9) Given the focus on innovation and change, are libraries still a repository for books?

## Phase II – What Our Shared Stories Revealed

Before the in-service training began, each group was asked to record their responses to the questions and discussion prompts. As mentioned above, our prompts were primarily related to the key themes discovered in Phase I. After introducing themselves and sharing their first library memories, we asked, “What does the library mean to you?” As discussed above, these questions/prompts were designed to help participants share their collective identity as a library culture. During their discussions and storytelling sessions, several themes emerged that indicated: the library is a place for the community to come together; it means connections; it is an information source; it means learning and diversity. The answers Mina expected, such as resources, services, programs and books (identified in our 2012 survey) were now appearing as only minor themes. Other interesting terms were used in response to this question: potential, welcome, inspiration, public service, safety and positive experiences. It was apparent to us that the staff was feeling pretty good about what they do and the atmosphere they were attempting to create. It was also

apparent that the library culture was shifting in terms of its values and beliefs. These responses provided new “sacred bundle” stories that reflect the changing identity of the library system as a whole.

At this point, the first theme identified in Phase I (libraries represent the ideals of freedom and stability to their communities) was presented to the group as a topic for discussion and shared storytelling. As they orally reported to the entire group, their discussions focused on several concepts: personal growth, equal access to information and resources, opportunities, and finally, that freedom of ideas and expression were key to the promotion of freedom. The fact that libraries have been a constant in the community, were a safe place for everyone, and functioned as anchors in our communities reinforced the paradoxical concept of stability. Enacting professional values of promoting privacy, neutrality, freedom from judgment, and opposition to censorship created a sense of great pride for the staff. A staff member reported that libraries should be “stable but not stale.” Another member commented that “libraries are like comfort food in physical form.”

When asked why libraries were important for the maintenance of democratic values--the second theme identified in Phase I--staff readily listed many concepts that showed how these values are shared by our system's libraries. Among those values listed were the concepts of equality for everyone and freedom from prejudice and discrimination. Staff discussions addressed freedom of speech, intellectual freedom, and the value of diverse opinions and viewpoints. Staff members sensed that the significance of citizenship, literacy, safety, and trust enhanced the quality of life for all our community members. As one staff member commented, a library is a “great equalizer” within a community. Another indicated, “if you want to offer equal opportunities, it starts with equitable access to information.” As many noted, the library is a great place in which younger people can learn respectful behaviors from the older generation.

The social connections created in libraries have become a pivotal marker of change for libraries. An overwhelming marker of this change is the variety of programs and personal and professional connections created in the library. The library staff have learned to say “yes” and to adapt quickly to needs and trends in our communities. Examples of these programmatic changes are STEM and STEAM programs for children and teens. Art and dance partnerships also allow for more greatly diversified library programming. Health, mental health, and social service programs are the results of partnerships built with other community organizations. It is noted that some libraries are creating fantastic programs, and there is a desire to better utilize these resources system-wide. Book shelves are being replaced with open spaces to allow for libraries to become gathering places. In this regard, we heard a compelling story. As one group reiterated, “only in a public library can a business consultant from Chicago hold an intensely meaningful conversation with the resident homeless person who likes to have ‘conversations’ with the portrait of the “Lady in Red” in our Quiet Reading Room.” The conversation between this unlikely pair ended in an embrace.

Libraries have become leaders in encouraging members to pursue lifelong learning opportunities. This theme was noted frequently in the Phase I interviews. Exploring this concept from a different angle, we asked staff, “How has the library changed *you*?”—recognizing that change is a reciprocal process. Learning social skills was a primary focus of staff discussions. Improved communication skills, socialization, patience, tolerance, and flexibility were identified by staff as ways the library experience has changed them. Understanding the diversity in their communities also ranked highly. Understanding poverty, greater awareness of mental health issues, respecting individuality, and treating each communication transaction as unique and not as routine—all these change who we are. Library staff appear to be more aware of how the library and its access to resources effect change in ourselves and our communities. As one staff member reported, she had learned that “you can judge a book by its cover but certainly not a person.” Another indicated, “we are the places where people—all people—can better their lives and be more informed to be good citizens.”

The next question allowed staff to dream. What will the Library of the Future look like? Words that emphasized “growth” dominated the list; words such as: more, bigger, better, different, flexible, and innovative.

These descriptions relate to every area of library services. Staff equally recognized the need for technology to support growth and ideas, and the need for more staff that is better trained and better paid. Perhaps most important, they wanted to retain superior staff. For the library of the future, we are asking for specialized spaces for hands-on programs, teen spaces with more and diversified technology available to enhance learning and creativity, open exterior space for gardens, and innovative programming. We also want multi-use spaces to accommodate various learning styles, disabilities and age groups. These spaces need to incorporate dance, the arts, community centers, maker activities, and utilize satellite sites located beyond our walls. Funding and its relationship to business and community connections are very important in our future. We heard the voices of caution: warning about growth while maintaining our integrity, supporting our home-like feel, focusing our purchasing based on valid collection tools, and defining the outcomes we want to achieve.

As described by Marek (2011), all of these shared stories are what Stephen Denning describes as “springboard stories;” i.e., stories that can spark action for members during a strategic planning process that leads to organizational change and learning. As Marek indicates, such stories enable a leap in understanding that can induce brainstorming and change.

Our final question addressed the topic of tradition versus innovation. We asked: “Are libraries still a repository for books?” Several groups simply responded “yes,” indicating the desire to maintain the traditional view of libraries. These stories are “cautionary tales” according to Marek (2011, p. 35). Although most cautionary tales typically highlight the negative outcomes of not making organizational changes, in this case these stories cautioned against “throwing out the baby with the bathwater,” i.e., getting rid of books altogether.

The vast majority of those attending the in-service training, however, in response to the question, “Are libraries still a repository for books?” said “yes... **but**...” and listed all the other things that our libraries currently are and are becoming. Here, it became readily apparent that our library culture is, in fact, evolving. Libraries need traditional books and resources, but we must continue to provide new ways of accessing information and services. To prevent libraries from becoming obsolete, we must broaden the concept of “library” to include real-life experiences. Libraries provide access to leisure activities and social interactions through book groups and sewing or knitting circles, not to mention LEGO clubs and video gaming. Historically, providing information and access to it is the foundation upon which libraries are built. However, methods of providing these foundational elements, and relationships with our communities, are ever-changing.

## Our Debriefing Story

A few weeks after our in-service training, we met again. We had some edits on a draft manuscript to discuss, but we also wanted to debrief about the in-service training. When Deborah asked Mina if the in-service training unfolded the way she wanted it to, Mina responded with a resounding “Absolutely.” She was impressed with the level of ownership staff members exhibited when it came to the themes we shared with them from Phase I. Her goal of having them recognize that these were *their stories, their ideas*, was realized. Deborah agreed that the training went well and added that she was particularly impressed with the level of engagement she witnessed. Having taught small-group discussion for many years, she indicated that not all group activities are so successful. This indicated that the level of involvement by staff members was productive. After reviewing the in-service training evaluation forms, Mina shared some of the results.

Responses from the in-service training evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. Staff members commented: “the passion of our staff members is very exciting to see;” “this [in-service training] validated for me the role a library plays in the community.” Another employee noted, “I may not be doing something heroic at the library but I still have an impact on people’s lives.” Only a few participants questioned the value of the training, making

comments such as: “I don’t know how this in-service training helped me learn how to check out books better” or “This in-service training was too philosophical for my tastes. I don’t see the practicality of it.” These negative evaluations are quite understandable. We had designed the in-service training specifically to explore the current library culture, i.e., the attitudes, values, beliefs, and the thinking behind what staff members typically do every day. So, we interpreted these few negative comments positively. To us, these comments indicated that we had succeeded in creating a communicative space where staff members could explore their evolving collective identity at a more abstract level. We had provided an important opportunity, therefore, for participants to reflect about who they are and what they want to become as a library of the twenty-first century.

Not being an employee of the library system, Deborah was especially interested in whether any of the stories heard that day or if the way the in-service unfolded had been surprising to Mina. Mina indicated that two things surprised her (in a positive way). One was the level of passion that groups showed when they reported out to the whole group. It was evident to her that these had been productive conversations and instances of storytelling about the themes at a level she could have only hoped for. The other surprise for her was seeing library staff take the ideas about the library of the future even further. Some visionaries see home delivery of materials using drones, for example! Or, they see Pop-up Libraries in the most resource-deprived and diverse areas of our communities. Or, they see even greater use of new and developing technologies.

As our conversation ended, Mina mentioned that the York County Library System was under new leadership. While creating and communicating vision during this time of profound change will again prove challenging, our collection of library stories and the time spent identifying the current values and beliefs of library staff and leadership is encouraging. It provided much-needed scaffolding from which the York County System’s Library of the Future has evolved. From Deborah’s perspective, it is apparent that the transformational process is well underway. For Mina, it appears that the scaffolding is in place but now it is time to construct the libraries we envision. A new strategic plan is being formulated and the narratives collected have already been utilized in the planning process.

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To end, we share a story from one of our library staff who attended the in-service training focused on storytelling. Mina received the following email:

*“Hello Mina,*

*I just wanted to say thank you for this morning. That was so empowering and really got to the core of why we do what we do. It was amazing to hear all of that and to talk about it, it got me so excited to be part of something like this.*

*I wrote this poem that I want to share with you:*

*Home*

*The library once again took me in*

*Like family, like home, like a second skin.*

*And they will take me in again, and again, and again*

*Until I am old and grey and thin.*

*Because you see the library is not just books for the eyes*

*It is about ideas and visions and impact and lives*

*It is about achieving, dreaming, changing, growing and yes:*

*Even family ties.”*

Dawn States (2016)

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol: Narratives, Culture Reimaging, and the York County Library System

#### *Basic Biographical Information*

- Have you been a library user all of your life?
- How long have you worked or volunteered in a library?
- What drew you to work in a library?
- What library tasks do you enjoy the most? The least?
- What is your educational background?
- Where did you come from? Are you a York county native?
- Gender
- Age
- Marital status

1. Please tell me your story of going to a public library for this first time.
2. In what ways has the library changed people's lives---can you tell a story about a person's change process?
3. Please tell me a story of a library user that you worked with that has impacted you the most as a staff member.
4. Describe the ways you or a library patron has used the library during different life phases—for example, childhood, teens, young adult, and so on.
5. What does the library mean to you?
6. What's the value of the current-day library as a social and/or cultural institution?
7. What changes in the library have impacted your members the most?
8. What would an "ideal library" of the future look like?
9. If you could make one thing happen in the Library of the Future, what would it be?
10. Is the library primarily an information source for its local members---or is it something else—and if so, what would that be? How would you describe that something else?
11. How are library staff members more relevant than ever before?