

# **When a Metaphor "Works": Contestation, Rationalization and Responsibility in Middle Class Labor**

**Gail E. Bader (Ball State), William Graves III (Bryant), James M. Nyce (Emporia State)**

*"However men may analyze their experiences within any domain, they inevitably know and understand them best by referring them to other domains for elucidation. It is in that metaphoric cross-referencing of domains, perhaps, that culture is integrated, providing us with the sensation of wholeness. And perhaps the best index of cultural integration or disintegration, or of genuineness or spuriousness in culture for that matter, is the degree to which men can feel the aptness of each other's metaphors." (Fernandez 1986: 25)*

## **Introduction**

Fernandez knew, as did Kenneth Burke to whom Fernandez owed so much, that the fundamental human problem of maintaining what he elsewhere called the "inchoate sense of wholeness" was critically linked to the never-ending dilemma of "the degree to which men can feel the aptness of each other's metaphors." And since the publication of "Persuasions and Performances" nearly 30 years ago, a great deal of anthropological, sociological and historical work on "power and resistance," "hegemony," and "cultural reproduction and change" can be usefully framed as particular responses to a number of fundamental questions implicit in Fernandez' quote -- When, and under what types of conditions, does any particular "metaphor" or "trope" serve to promote cooperation and social integration? When, and under what types of conditions, does it serve to promote conflict and social disintegration? When and how is the "aptness" of any given "metaphor" or "trope" lost? We believe these to be among the most central, enduring questions in the Human Sciences.

This paper will begin to examine an important new set of tropes that are being employed to re-organize work in a research library once again. These new tropes argue for and rationalize the re-organization of middle-class, professional work in ways that can be seen, depending on one's perspective, to liberate the individual's potential for creative work in a bureaucratic organization and to give free rein to individual initiative or to de-skill professional work practices, routinize such practices or even to eliminate jobs completely.

We have just begun this study and much important ground remains to be covered, so in this paper we will focus quite specifically and, admittedly narrowly, on the institutional rhetoric of the “change agent”, an individual whose official job it is to guide the changes occurring in the re-organization of work at this research library. What follows, then, represents our initial analyses of a number of open-ended, in-depth interviews with several key administrators against the background of our independent readings of an extensive set of recent “strategic planning” documents the library has provided us with. This is a critical starting point for our entire on-going study, for the rhetoric of the “change agent” clearly represents the present authoritative voice of strategic planning in this institution.

### **Our First Ethnographic Study: The LIBRARY AS COMPUTER Metaphor**

The 1980s was a decade in which the imagination and attention of the U.S. middle-class was virtually consumed by utopian visions and dystopian nightmares of a “computer revolution” or, as some chose to call it, “an information technology revolution.” In 1987 when we first studied change in the Brown University Library system, the Library was attempting to create and implement a multi-functional computer system (JOSIAH) that was supposed to seamlessly integrate all information, all staff, all units, all work and all library users (Graves and Bader 1987). The envisioned all-encompassing technical functionality of the “computer” then became, as it did in a great number of different institutional settings throughout America in the 1980s, the “apt” rhetorical figure for planning, discussing and debating future definitions of information, library management, professional functions and staff work. “The library as computer,” the Library of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we heard again and again, would be a radically different type of institution because of “computerization.”

During our research in the Library in the mid-80s, perceptions and feelings of inexorable, accelerating “change” were voiced at all levels of the institution. Indeed, the fundamental “dilemma” was how the library was to deal with “change” accelerating change in information technologies, change in the publishing industries, change in academic fields of

knowledge, change in the library profession, change in library users' needs and interests, and change in the world at large. And when we did our first study, the metaphor of the LIBRARY AS COMPUTER seemed to provide necessary, fruitful and "apt" ways of responding to the perceived and felt "dilemmas" of rapid "change" at all levels of the organization. It did so by strategically calling attention to the need to focus on key aspects of the internal organization of the library itself.

However, as we carefully documented in that first study, the metaphor of the LIBRARY AS COMPUTER eventually became a contested trope within the Library system. But what came to be contested was not the metaphor itself, but the *degree* to which the metaphor was perceived as "apt." And this took the form of debates concerning the appropriate enactment of that metaphor in redefining the organization and nature of routine work practices within the library. In essence, the fundamental, implicit question informing these debates was – *Is this specific metaphor "apt" because it predicates centralization and the technocratic rationalization of library work or because it predicates decentralization and increasing autonomy throughout the work place?* We have covered that history and those issues more thoroughly in previous publications (Graves and Bader 1987; Graves 1995; Graves 2000), so we will not discuss them here. We only wish to underscore the key point that this institutional metaphor served quite powerfully to frame and channel institutional debates over the enactment of the metaphor itself in changing the library and the nature of work within the library.

### **Our Current Restudy: The LIBRARY AS REAL WORLD Metaphor**

Thirteen years later we returned to the Brown University Library. We found that the formal institutional structure and the definition of work had changed very little since our last study. Now, however, we found the library in the midst of a new, even more ambitious wave of planning for reorganization and change. However, the dominant, compelling "computer" tropes about which we had heard so much had lost a great deal of their previous "aptness." Indeed, in our first key interviews with the Library's computer-systems staff, our questions about the role

of “computerization” were turned away decisively, almost impatiently (centralized library computer-system) is *just* a tool now.” Once the major institutional metaphor for dealing with all fundamental questions of continuity and change, JOSIAH was now “JUST a tool,” a taken-for-granted feature of the organization of information and work within the library. Apparently, the “computer revolution” was over.

If anything, thirteen years later the traditional perceptions of and feelings about “change” have become even more acute. The new planning for major reorganization of the library system is ever more driven by what university librarians and staff see now as “extraordinary” changes occurring in their environment – their professional community, their institutions and their client base. For librarians, while financial, political and demographic changes are an understood part of this, the most important issue seems to be perceptions of the rate at which change is occurring (Shaughnessy 1996).

Nevertheless, the speed with which change is occurring is still often talked about in reference to technology. Its perceived *pervasiveness* as a medium for information transfer in all sectors of society and its perceived *ubiquity* as a generalized work tool are felt to be blurring formal distinctions and divisions within library work itself. In response to these general perceptions of the rate of inexorable change and its link to the pervasiveness and ubiquity of new technologies, university libraries have begun to shift their focus away from their local holdings, storage and the organization of information to issues of “global access” and the provision of electronic and online forms of information and services to library patrons. However, managing this shift from “local storage” to “global access” is now understood as requiring university libraries “to do more” than just address their own institutional “needs”. Now the focus should be on customers and clients and their “satisfaction,” but this, it is believed, will require a fundamental rethinking of library organization. From this will emerge a client-centered restructuring of what a university library is, how library staff positions are defined and organized, and how staff work is to be accomplished within the library.

The once dominant metaphor LIBRARY AS COMPUTER has lost its perceived “aptness” in these new considerations. As the shift from a focus on local storage to a focus on global access has come to dominate deliberations about how to deal with the “accelerating pace of change,” a new set of tropes has recently emerged to replace the older LIBRARY AS COMPUTER metaphor. The new organizing metaphor is the LIBRARY AS REAL WORLD and in radical contrast to the previous LIBRARY AS COMPUTER metaphor, this new metaphor strategically calls attention to the perceived need to remove all internal divisions and external walls that separate the institution of the library from the “real world” of the *vividly imagined* free-ranging, unfettered, independent library patron.

Just as the LIBRARY AS COMPUTER metaphor should be understood as a particular institutional refraction of the broader middle-class enchantment with the “computer revolution” in the 1980s, we think the LIBRARY AS REAL WORLD metaphor should be understood as a particular institutional refraction of the contemporary widespread appeal of the dominant corporate rhetoric of “reengineering” or “reinventing” the corporation, “flattening -building,” “participatory management,” and a host of other closely related *corporate solutions* to the perceived dilemmas of change.

But what we find most striking and most significant about this shift from the metaphor of LIBRARY AS COMPUTER to the LIBRARY AS REAL WORLD is the extent to which the authoritative institutional rhetoric we outline below incorporates strong ideological claims about normative connections among notions of “choice,” “responsibility” and “self” in the “real world” of contemporary American life. And it is these types of claims, we fully anticipate, that will become the new “contested terrain” over the degree to which the LIBRARY AS REAL WORLD metaphor will be perceived as “apt” for dealing with the perceived dilemmas of current accelerating change

## **The “Old” Library and the “New” Library**

The Brown University Library’s reorganization at present is more talked about than enacted. It is a “strategic plan” for reorganization. Given this, what follows is an attempt to excavate the authoritative institutional rhetoric that defines how reorganization is currently understood, what it should be and what it should achieve.

In the remaining sections of this paper, we examine the rhetoric of the Library’s designated “change agent” in order to understand what, exactly, will remove all internal divisions and external walls that separate the institution of the library from the “real world” of the *vividly imagined* free-ranging, unfettered, independent library patron. In particular, we will look at how notions of work, authority and institution are being redefined in the library’s current reorganization efforts. To do this, we will focus on how the individual (here called Joanne) tasked by the University Librarian to help bring the library into the 21<sup>st</sup> century talks about work, the workplace and authority in both the “old” and the “n

## **The Library as “Protected Arena”**

The rhetorical contrast between the “real world” and the contemporary workplace is critically important to understanding the Brown University reorganization plan. According to Joanne, the problem with the way the workplace is currently organized is that it is “a protected arena” in marked contrast to the “real world.” In the “real world”, she argues, adults are held accountable for their actions and decisions. For example, if an individual fails to pay his/her taxes, that individual, and no one else, is responsible. Her aim for the staff, as she phrases it, is for “everybody [to] act like an adult”.

Reorganization is necessary, first and foremost, because the workplace is a “protected arena”, Joanne claims, staff are not able to act like adults because, as the workplace is currently organized, there is always someone “higher up” who can assume ultimate authority for a decision. At the same time, it is the formal division of labor

within this “protected arena” that allows individuals to escape the consequences of their own actions by shifting responsibility to other individuals. In Joanne’s eyes, it is this institutionally mandated lack of responsibility for one’s own decisions that, in effect, reduces library staff to children. And children, of course, are not legally responsible for their own decisions<sup>1</sup>.

This lack of responsibility in the workplace is contrasted with the responsibility she claims is demanded by the “real world”. In life outside of work, adults are held by middle class Americans to be responsible for their own actions and decisions. As Joanne said to us, “I have to pay my bills myself, work should be like real life. Where do I go to [when I can pay my own bills]”. It is this lack of responsibility for our actions that makes workers into children. It is also this lack of responsibility that marks the work currently being done in the research library as “old work”.

Joanne constantly refers to the current work in the Library as the “old work.” And, from the perspective of strategic plans for reorganization, “old work” entails a number of undesirable characteristics. First, “old work” is work that is defined for one by someone else. Managers, unions, the canons of professionalism, and even individual patrons currently define for the staff member the work that is to be done. Thus, externally imposed objectives and goals define and shape the nature of the work staff members routinely accomplish.

In this “protected arena,” waiting for someone else to define objectives or subordinating one’s actions to externally defined goals essentially removes choice and the consequences of choice for individual staff members. This “waiting,” in fact, is the hallmark of the old work. Whether we consider the case of staff members waiting for patrons to come to them with problems, or waiting for directives from superiors, or accepting without question union or professional definitions of “the job,” old work means work defined for one by others.

### **“New Work” and the Library as “Real World”**

The workplace, Joanne claims, should be like the real world. As she says, “The principles of real life should be the principles of the workplace”. There is no one outside of work who

mediates our decisions. There is no “boss” or “higher up” to take the responsibility for an adult who makes a poor choice. If you fail to pay your own taxes, you pay the consequences. There, the middle class seems to believe, is no one else to “check” your choices or to ultimately take responsibility for your life choices. Joanne insists that the workplace should reflect these same conditions precisely because the conditions of the “real world” are real, commonsensical and s, unconstrained by external structures and impositions, are what we as individuals should aspire to in the workplace. And this is because in the real world, with its lack of mediators, individuals are defined and evaluated in terms of how they enact choice, exercise autonomy, and accept responsibility. Furthermore, because these conditions “bring out” creative and adult behavior in individuals in the “real world,” such conditions should also inform the workplace.

The “old work” of the library organization must be replaced by the “new work,” according to Joanne. The staff member should not simply “respond” to patron’s needs, superior’s directives or institutional structures. The staff member should be proactive and take the initiative. Thus, for example, the appropriate model of “new work” for staff members in Public Services would be that of a counselor, an interviewer, or a salesperson, not a passive information source at a help desk.

In the “old work,” library staff responded to patrons’ requests for assistance in using the resources of the library. But, in the “new work,” library staff will take the lead in determining what patrons actually need. Thus, in contrast to the “old work,” the “new work” does not recognize the boundaries and constraints legitimized by contractual, ideological or formal organizational definitions of work. “New work” will require that individual staff members take the initiative in redefining their own positions and choosing their own tasks.

“New work,” then, will also require that individual staff members actually take the initiative in redefining institutional order. “Heirarchy does not serve us well when we want to initiate responsibility,” argued Joanne. In fact, she continues, the formal organization of work in the library actually restrains staff from realizing their potential as active, creative

individuals. According to Joanne, “You need structure but it doesn’t have to be heirarchy. [It can be based] not on position but on competence, knowledge, skills, and so forth”.

This rhetoric can be seen at work in the library’s detailed strategic plans for reorganization. The plans call for replacing traditional elements of departmental structure and authority with very generally defined “task-forces” that have such general functi and delivery,” “scholarly resources” and “organizational support,” for example. In keeping with the desirable characteristics and definitions of the “new work,” individual staff members will choose, on the basis of their their self-defined interests and claimed competencies, the “task-forces” they wish to belong to. In this way, traditional formal bureaucratic organization will be dramatically reduced, if not done away with completely, by the individual’s own initiative, choice and acceptance of responsibility.

This rhetoric also underwrites major changes in the way the Library will form major administrative committees and special ad hoc task-forces. In the “old library” under the strictures of the “old work,” individual staff members were assigned to such committees on the basis of professional credentials, position in the hierarchy and departmental representation. In the “new library” with the advent of the “new work,” such committees will be based not on organizational criteria, but on the individual interests and competencies of specific staff members. Individual staff members will volunteer for committees, rather than be assigned to these by supervisors or department heads.

### **What Keeps the Library Staff from Embracing the “New Work”?**

Why is it nearly impossible to do “new work” in today’s library organization? According to the change agent, staff are currently constrained in two ways: they are constrained by traditional ideologies of work and by the role middle management plays in the organization. We will begin by looking at the ways Joanne views ideologies as constraining library staff from realizing their potential.

r the change agent it does not. Professionalism, as Joanne frames it, is an artificial ideology that pre-defines the kind of work staff are supposed to do. This is an arbitrary, externally imposed boundary, Joanne argues, and it removes the ability to define work from the individual. In so doing, it keeps staff from realizing their full potential as adults. Not surprisingly, in fact, Joanne's own career exemplifies this. Even though she does not have a professional library degree, Joanne has moved up the hierarchy through positions in a number of library departments. At present, she is very near the top of the institutional hierarchy. She reports directly to the University Librarian.

For Joanne, unions pose the same problems as professionalism. Unions limit their members from realizing their full potential by defining the nature and kind of work they can do according to contractual agreements and categories. Unions bundle certain tasks into "jobs", allocate jobs, define workplace conditions and organize workplace relationships. In so doing, unions limit individual choice and potential by removing staff's ability to shape their own work.

The problem with both professionalism and unionism is that they are imposed ideological statements about work and its relation to self. More to the point, they do not reflect the "real world" i.e., life outside the workplace. Like hierarchy then, these conventional structures arbitrarily constrain the individual and his or her potential in the workplace. But these ideologies are not the only things that currently limit staff's ability to perform the "new work". Staff is also constrained by the organization of work and work relations that have created middle management.

Middle management is a key obstacle to staff's ability to undertake the "new work". With the introduction of new technologies, middle management has lost their role as mediators between upper management and staff. Middle management, by the very nature of their jobs as "approvers" and "communicators" between staff and upper management, prevent staff from acting like creative self-actualizing adults. In their role as "authorities" who can legitimize action, they rob staff of their ability to make decisions and to act on their own initiative. "The problem is that hierarchy lets someone else decide [what you have to do]". After all, if one is only doing what one was allowed to do, staff is reduced to following orders. Their ability to act on their own is limited.

Middle management, as seen by Joanne, represents much of what is wrong with today's workplace. As mediators, middle managers interfere with staff's (natural) ability to act, make choices, accept the responsibility of their choices and act autonomously. Middle management reduces staff autonomy. They constrain, stand in the way of, and interfere with natural choice and, action on the part of the individual. In short, staff are trapped in an organization that allows them only to follow orders and directives.

### **The Change Agent's Vision of Middle-Class Work**

How should the workplace be organized according to the change agent? The most desirable situation is to make the workplace as much like the "real world" as possible. In the real world we find no unnatural organizational structures or ideologies that rob individuals of their ability to make choices. In the real world individuals are free agents. They make their own choices and forge their own destinies. In short, library staff should be like Americans in their "real life", their non-work world. Without the unnatural structures and ideologies of the workplace, library staff can be creative and realize their full potential because there is no one to tell them what they should or should not do. Given this their actions both are products of and reflect an authentic self. This must be the shape of the new work and the new library.

To enable the “new work” we must get rid of the old organization. Rather than attempt to negotiate hierarchy and structure, the muddling through that is often at the heart of work today, Joanne believes that structure should be abandoned. Joanne sees structure not as just superordinate and imposed but as “unnatural”. It keeps us as such from realizing our potential as creative, responsible individuals. By “dissolving” hierarchy and structure, institutions will both valorize and emerge from the unmediated, individual actions and choices. Most importantly, the very key to “dissolving” hierarchy and structure is empowering individuals to take the initiative, define their own choices and accept the consequences of those choices.

These are the conditions that will bring about the “new work”. Work and real life currently have little in common, according to Joanne, but they should have everything in common. Library staff must be persuaded to do at work what they naturally do in real life. If the staff members will accept the commonality between the real world and work and rid themselves of limiting ideologies, hierarchy and structure will be seen as irrelevant, mere impediments to self-actualization, and will ultimately wither away.

### **The Challenge of the New Metaphor LIBRARY AS REAL WORLD**

What we find remarkable about this new metaphor is that it practically negates the previous LIBRARY AS COMPUTER metaphor. That older institutional metaphor established the framework for debates about the appropriate and proper relationships between routine work practices and the traditional formal organizational structures and divisions that defined the library. On the one hand, this older metaphor was used to argue the primacy and precedence of rational, formal organizational structures over irrational, unruly, irregular routine work practices that needed to be rationally ordered.

On the other hand, by bringing the disjunctures between formal organizational structures and irrational, unruly, irregular work practices into sharper focus, this same

metaphor also enabled staff members to reclaim those same “irrational, unruly and irregular” work practices as embodying the “real” and enduring systematic logic of the organization of work within the library, a logic which should drive, not be driven by, fundamental organizational change (Graves 1995).

However, the new LIBRARY AS REAL WORLD metaphor radically reframes the debates about organizational change by bringing the individual into sharp focus while simultaneously pushing the traditional formal organizational structures and divisions far into the background. Within the framework of the LIBRARY AS COMPUTER metaphor, the formal characteristics of the organization itself were submitted to intense scrutiny. Now within the framework of the LIBRARY AS REAL WORLD, the characteristics of the person will be submitted to the same intense scrutiny.

As the Library proceeds with its planned reorganization, what is bound to be contested within the framework of this new metaphor will be the perceived nature of the connections among choice, action and the notion of the self at work in the library setting. However, in the rhetoric of the change agent and in the general strategic plans for reorganization, we see that the fundamental solution to the perceived need for reorganization rests on a very clear set of assumptions about the nature and significance of the connections among choice, action and the self.

The rhetoric of this reorganization effort makes an explicit link between “right” choice, “legitimate” action and an adult notion of self. What bridges and links them is a direct, unmediated appeal to “individual responsibility”. In this way, the rhetoric of the change agent gives us a remarkably clear and simple picture of how choice, action and self can so often “go -sense, taken-for-granted way in American culture.

Furthermore, the persuasiveness of this particular rhetoric of the connection of choice-action-self is that it has the power to make hierarchy “go away” by redefining it in such a way that it literally disappears into the background and, finally, totally out of view.

It is worth noting, of course, that whatever else these reorganization efforts achieve, hierarchy and structure do not “go away”. And this, of course, is bound to create specific problems for the “change agent” and the plans for reorganization. Nevertheless, for middle class Americans, what these efforts at reorganization offer is an opportunity to rewrite what hierarchy and structure means in the workplace – about the only place where Americans today “believe” there is structure that is, to some limited extent, necessary.

What these reorganization efforts and the rhetoric that accompanies them do, is move these terms away from a strictly sociological reading in which power, class and structure overlap. The result is that for the middle class these issues are literally taken off the table. The end result is that hierarchy and structure are being rewritten in the most compelling and convincing of American terms – in reference to the autonomous, voluntaristic self.

## REFERENCES CITED

Fernandez, J. 1986. "Persuasions and Performances: Of the Beast in Every Body and the Metaphors of Everyman," in *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture*," Indiana University Press.

Graves, W. III and G.E. Bader. 1987. *The Library as Information System: Aspects of Continuity and Change in the Staff's World. IRIS Technical Report Series, Nr. 87-7*. Brown University.

Graves, W. III. 2000. "Instrumentalism and the Social Consequences of Technological Choice" in G.L. Carter (ed.), *Empirical Approaches to Sociology, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. Allyn & Bacon.

Graves, W. III. 1995. "Ideologies of Computerization," in M. Shields (ed.), *The Social Construction of Academic Work and Technology*. Erlbaum Press.

Shaughnessy, T.W. 1996. Lessons from Restructuring the Library. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*. 22:251-256.