

What does “*The time has come... to talk of many things!*” mean to libraries and vendors?

The rest of the stanza continues: “Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax--/Of cabbages—and kings--/And why the sea is boiling hot--/And whether pigs have wings.” Reading this, we think how silly, how like Lewis Carroll with his nonsense rhymes, but really, it’s not so silly. What are we—in any group—talking about? Really talking about? We might make small talk about any number of things: politics, current events, the latest must-see television show or movie, but we’re quickly onto the next subject as the news cycle changes, hardly scratching the surface of any topic. We have lost the art of conversation, that thoughtful back and forth between people who not only want to speak their minds but also hear what others have to say as well.

If we should be talking, what should we be talking about? As an academic librarian, I’d like to discuss keeping information affordable, for everyone, but especially for students. Maybe this means discussing open educational resources (OERs), database subscriptions, journal embargoes, open access journals, e-books and other textbook alternatives.

Let’s talk about students and other patrons and how we can improve their academic experience, research skills and maybe even their lives. Let’s talk about making the college experience better for first generation students, first year students, students of color, female students. Let’s talk about inclusion and making the library welcoming to students through architecture, interior design, furniture choices, displays and programs.

Let’s talk about research instruction, fake news, deep fakes and what we should be doing about it all.

Let’s talk about the faculty we serve and how the library and librarians facilitate the research process, how we interact with their students, and the role we play in learning. Let’s talk about embedded librarians and how students can benefit from having access to their “own” librarian. Let’s talk about all the ways we can and do make academia better.

Let’s talk about physical, hold-in-your-hands books: their importance, their cost, their futures, their retention and storage. Let’s talk about building and maintaining a collection—the tools, technology and knowledge needed. Let’s talk about what students and patrons need (or what we think they need) and what they want (or what we think they want).

Let’s talk about the digital collection and preservation and access to art, photographs, letters, and ephemera.

Let’s talk about digital scholarship: what it is and why it is important. Let’s talk about ebooks and the current pricing models: how it’s working and how it’s not.

Let’s talk about technology. Let’s talk about the technology that is available to us now and what we really need for the future. Let’s talk about why building the perfect ILS is so hard (apparently). Let’s talk about cataloging and MARC records and electronic resources.

Let’s talk about the future of libraries and librarianship on every level, but especially on the college campus.

Let's talk about the hiring process and the skills 21st century libraries need. Let's talk about career paths and skill development. Let's talk about why librarians leave the profession and why they stay for entire careers, mostly working steadily and quietly. Let's talk about para-professionals. Let's talk about how they impact students and the work they do in libraries, and let's especially talk about how they are expected to do more as libraries have to cut budgets.

Let's talk. We have real issues to discuss and real problems to solve. When we sit down with our colleagues to talk about shoes, ships, sealing wax, cabbages, kings, and so on, we are really discussing basic needs, transportation, archival materials, food, decision makers and aspects of reality. We are talking about important issues and are moving the profession forward, to be sure, but we are also enhancing our humanity. Let's talk at the Charleston Conference and then later let's talk as new friends and colleagues after we're home. After all, we have work to do.