

Practice-Based Article

Navigating Complexity: Strategies for Libraries in a Rapidly Changing World

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ABSTRACT

In a world marked by rapid change and increasing complexity, libraries can play a pivotal role in helping communities navigate uncertainties. This article summarises the presentation '*How We Make Better Sense of a Rapidly Changing and Complex World*,' delivered at the Health Sciences Libraries Group annual conference in March 2025. The presentation, led by Mairéad Mc Keown and Amy Bond, explored the challenges posed by a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world and proposes strategies for libraries and librarians to thrive. This includes adopting a systems-thinking approach, practicing conversational leadership, and leveraging the Knowledge Café methodology to foster dialogue and collaboration. Our presentation underscored the importance of developing 21st-century skills and AI literacy to remain adaptable and resilient.

KEYWORDS

VUCA, systems thinking, conversational leadership, Knowledge Café, libraries

INTRODUCTION

In the face of rapid technological advancements, geopolitical shifts, and environmental challenges, the modern world has become increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). Libraries, as centres of knowledge and information, must adapt to these changes to continue serving their communities effectively. This article summarises insights from the presentation '*How We Make Better Sense of a Rapidly Changing and Complex World*,' delivered by Mairéad Mc Keown and Amy Bond at the Health Sciences Libraries Group annual conference in March 2025 (McKeown & Bond, 2025).

PRESENTATION

Diverse Experience and Expertise

At the start of the conference, we asked attendees to complete a short survey via QR code for quick responses. This was designed to engage diversity and expertise within the library community, in the practical Knowledge Café which followed our presentation. Our survey revealed that amongst attendees there was 1,061 combined years of experience across eight library sectors and four generations (61 survey respondents). The conference community was well-equipped to tackle the challenges of a VUCA world. This diversity fostered a lot of conversation and knowledge flowed freely whilst connections and networks were deepened and built.

Understanding the VUCA World

The concept of VUCA, initially introduced by the US Army War College, describes the turbulent and unpredictable nature of the modern world (Kurylo, 2021). Our presentation emphasised the interconnectedness of economic, environmental, geopolitical and societal global risks, which are too complex for any single leader or group to address alone (Elsner et al., 2025). Traditional approaches are no longer sufficient, and a more distributed, participatory form of leadership is required (Gurteen, n.d.-a).

To navigate the complexities of the VUCA world, libraries must adopt a systems-thinking approach. This involves viewing problems holistically and understanding the interconnections between various factors. Systems thinking enables better decision-making and problem-solving by considering the broader context (Systems Innovation, 2018).

Conversational Leadership

Conversational leadership, as advocated by David Gurteen, is a key strategy that libraries can use to navigate complexity. This approach involves stepping up, practicing leadership as an activity and adopting a conversational approach to the way we work. If we are to sustain the future of information, this type of leadership is vital (Dezuanni et al., 2024). By practicing conversational leadership, libraries can enhance their ability to influence, make better sense of complex issues, and renew the way they work together (Gurteen, n.d.-a).

The Knowledge Café Methodology

The Knowledge Café, a conversational leadership tool, was highlighted as an effective method for bringing people together to discuss and understand complex issues. This methodology encourages dialogue, knowledge sharing, sensemaking and community building. It provides a safe space for participants to express their ideas and learn from one another, engage in dialogue and emerge from conversations as slightly different people, all of which can ultimately lead to better outcomes (Gurteen, n.d.-b).

Developing 21st-Century Skills

The presentation also underscored the importance of developing 21st-century skills and AI literacy to remain adaptable and resilient. These skills include critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy. By embracing these competencies, libraries can better navigate the challenges of the VUCA world and continue to serve their communities effectively (Wikipedia, 2024).

PRACTICAL CASE STUDY

This section of the article focuses on work being done on Conversational Leadership at Bord Bia. Bord Bia is an Irish semi-state agency whose purpose is to bring Ireland's outstanding food, drink and horticulture to the world, thus enabling growth and sustainability of producers.

Peer Assist

Bord Bia's librarians have co-created a series of best practice templates (see below) for generating insights on food and drink categories and markets around the world. The librarians assist colleagues to complete these through access to authoritative library sources and the transfer of skills and knowledge needed for successful report generation. Colleagues are offered an introductory call at the outset of a new project and the library team are on hand to peer assist if any further support is needed. These templates are now being used by colleagues across different functions and locations across the world.



Real World Examples of Conversational Leadership in Action at the Bord Bia Library

Image sources: Bord Bia

Knowledge Cafés

The librarians at Bord Bia create *Hot Topic* reports where they read a broad variety of resources on timely topics and analyse and synthesize the findings into a 10-page report with insights and implications for the Irish Food and Drink industry. After completing these reports, on areas such as food waste, AI and gut health, Bord Bia's librarians host a series of Knowledge Cafés. These are designed to disseminate the report findings, build a sense of community and bring colleagues together to help them make better sense of each topic through conversation and knowledge exchange.

After Action Reviews and Lessons Learned

Bord Bia's Knowledge & Market Intelligence Manager is leveraging tools like [After Action Reviews](#) (AAR) and [Lessons Learned](#) to bring colleagues together and convene conversations that help them stop, think, and reflect on learning experiences from strategic activities, to uncover insights that help drive a culture of continuous improvement (Gurteen, n.d.-c). It's worth noting whilst After Action Reviews and Lessons Learned activities have some similarities, they are in fact two different things. Lessons learned is a more

reflective learning activity that's conducted at the end of a project or programme. It explores similar questions to the AAR but the recap of objectives and what happened will be a more in-depth exercise (Goodman, 2012)

A number of these sessions have been hosted with multi-functional teams across the organisation, both face to face and online. Many colleagues are now using these tools as a way of working to strive for continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

The information provided in our presentation included valuable insights for libraries seeking to thrive in a VUCA world (McKeown & Bond, 2025). By adopting a systems-thinking approach, practicing conversational leadership, and leveraging the Knowledge Café methodology, libraries can enhance their adaptability, resilience, and ability to serve their communities. Indeed, developing 21st-century skills and AI literacy is crucial for remaining relevant and effective in the face of rapid change. As the world continues to evolve, those working in libraries must embrace new strategies and approaches to navigate complexity and foster a thriving future for our role, as well as strong information and knowledge provision.

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AUTHOR CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I have no known conflicts of interests to declare.

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