

CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR LIBRARIANS

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ABSTRACT

In order to keep up with developments within the profession, librarians need to continuously upgrade their knowledge and skills. This can be done through various methods. This article discusses the need and importance of continuous professional development for librarians.

Keywords: Continuing professional development; Librarians; Professionalism

INTRODUCTION

Librarianship is quintessentially serving a special social function rather than just a specific activity (Rubin, 2004). Librarians serve the public good by providing library service and by bringing people in contact with the vast body of public knowledge (Rubin, 2004). The basic functions of a library include selecting materials and developing collections, ordering and acquiring materials, making information available through document delivery, electronic delivery of information, and the provision of information access mechanisms, conserving and preserving materials, and programming including bibliographic and other forms of instruction in information access (Rubin, 2004).

The Librarian

The librarian is found in many types of libraries, which are primarily categorized into academic, public, special and school libraries. Each type of library has a distinct mission and a specific group of customers to serve. (Fourie, 2002). As such, the focus of the librarian in each of these types of libraries would vary accordingly. School libraries tend to be very simple organizations whereas large universities or public libraries are quite complex organizations (Rubin, 2004)

Initially, professional librarians were not needed to work in libraries, but as the work got more technical, there was such a need. Libraries and librarians are closely linked as what happens to one is likely to affect the other (Rubin, 2004). The 1900 saw the start of proper library schools. Before this period, the librarians or library workers

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learnt through apprenticeship and had no formal training. (Rubin, 2004). Though there was an influx of library schools, the material taught at the schools were not the same. In the 1950s, the American Board of Librarianship issued a new set of standards for library education (Rubin, 2004), and the American Library Association (ALA) Committee on Accreditation was formed and given the responsibilities of reviewing and accrediting library school programs, which is still followed today (Rubin, 2004).

Therefore, it is an extension to say that the education of training of librarians closely relate to developments in the economic and in professional education of the librarian (Rubin, 2004). Librarians should play a vital role in designing and using information systems in a manner that helps people solve their own information problems (Rubin, 2004).

Every profession in this modern age must continuously adapt itself to the rapidly evolving technological society. Keeping up with today's constant change and innovation is a challenging task, but one must undertake it to operate successfully in the world. (Chaudhary, 2001). Technology has been changing academic libraries in very obvious ways for a long time (Crawford, 2003), and has caused librarians to redefine and restructure library services, and in the process, the library itself (Rubin, 2004).

As the practising librarian is located at the very centre of this change, he must hasten to implement the advancements in library science in order to handle the mass of new information in all the areas of knowledge. This means that the practising librarian has a special responsibility to keep himself up to-date with developments in his field. (Chaudhary, 2001). The new technological environment is one in which professional and support staff each need significant skills. (Rubin, 2004). The rising challenge is to help the librarian become skillful in evaluating the usefulness and reliability of the wide array of information now available (Fourie, 2002).

Keeping one's skills, knowledge and expertise current and up-to-date is vital so that one can remain flexible and adaptable to change, and well placed to make the most of the opportunities change always brings (Simmonds, 2003). One's qualifications, whether academic, vocational or technical have a limited life span, probably as little as five years. (Simmonds, 2003). Some prophets of doom have predicted that information professionals who are unable to cope or keep abreast with the current technological developments in the profession will suffer the same fate as the dinosaurs (Abu Bakar, 2005).

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The real question is not whether libraries are needed, but how best to provide access to information in a networked world and how best to support the marketplace for idea (Borgman, 2001). In addition to their traditional responsibilities, many academic libraries are expanding into new areas, such as electronic publishing and tele-learning (Borgman, 2001). Core skills of librarians are still relevant, if not more relevant in this age, in electronic information provision, such as information handling, training and facilitating, evaluation and customer service. Core skills as cataloguing, classification (knowledge organisation), information retrieval, reference work and user education are fully applicable in an electronic context and all have a place in facilitating the effective use of the Internet changing information environment. (Larsen, 2005).

When commitment to learning and self-development is expected from a practising librarian, what an individual can do for himself often depends on his environment (Horvat, 2004). It is expected that the practising librarian is capable of offering high quality services to the users, who are visiting the physical library (Larsen, 2005). It is possible that the changes occurring in the information environment may require reconceptualising the role of the librarian (Rubin, 2004).

THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The practising librarian has to be forward looking and concentrate actively on competence development. (Larsen, 2005) He must be able to respond with a sense of urgency to critical information needs, and provide the information edge for the knowledge-based organization (Laili, 2005). Taking into account the speed of changes in librarianship, the practising librarian would need some kind of professional training after obtaining their formal education (Horvat, 2004). In order to fulfill this key information role, new practising librarians require two main types of competencies, professional and personal (Laili, 2005).

a. Professional Competencies

Professional competencies include having expert knowledge of the content of information resources, including the ability to critically evaluate and filter them, developing and managing convenient, accessible and cost-effective information services that are aligned with the strategic directions of the library; provide excellent instruction and support for library and information service users, assessing information needs and designing and marketing value-added information services and products to meet identified needs; using appropriate information technology to acquire, organize and disseminate information; and continuously improves information services in response to the changing needs. (Larsen, 2005)

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A number of approaches to professional development are possible such as keeping abreast of listservs and publications available in electronic form for current awareness; pursuing continuing education (providers may include professional associations, library systems, vendors, academic institutions); participating in professional associations (service on committees and contributing to publications such as newsletters); engaging in mentoring as mentor or mentee; and earning an advanced certificate or degree. Many traditional techniques of continuous professional development or CPD can be expanded in scope and sped up by incorporating the Internet into the process (Smith, 2001). Training courses organised locally for the entire staff or a department shows a measurable impact and stimulate new activities and change of attitudes (Larsen, 2005).

Weingand (1999) uses the fable of the blind men and the elephant as an analogy for the confusion and complexity surrounding continuing professional education, by attempting to place CPD within the whole of education for librarianship by answering those ever important 5W and 1H

- i. Who: CPD is in the best interests of every person working in the information industry.
- ii. What: CPD activities should keep information professionals up-to-date in their particular areas and provide them with training in new fields.
- iii. When: CPD is lifelong learning with the intent of maintaining competence and/or learning new skills.
- iv. Where: CPD venues include formal courses, workshops, seminars, conferences, tutorials, independent study and reading, and teaching, presentations, and publishing.
- v. Why: The shelf life of a degree is approximately three years and declining. Maintaining competence and learning new skills is critical for every professional.
- vi. How: CPD involves issues of both responsibility and quality. Participants need to feel that learning has taken place; funders must recognize values for monies expended; and providers require that training evaluations were positive and anticipated costs were met. Quality CPD programs can be created by conducting a needs assessment, planning and developing program objectives, and evaluating the education event.

A full-time course of one, two or three years ending in a qualification can appear to imply that no more education is necessary: once the initiation has been successfully

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undertaken, what incentive is there to do more? A full-time course cannot avoid being divorced from practical reality, and as a result the knowledge neither is, nor is seen to be, of practical relevance (Line, 2007).

This is not to say that no teaching is desirable. The emphasis must be on learning and experience, but good teaching can certainly help. This could and should take the form of crash courses (e.g. in applied statistics), frequent updating courses for all practising librarians over a certain level, and lectures integrated with practice – an actual job, not student placements in which trainees are too often regarded and treated as burdens. Some of the teaching could be done by specialists (e.g. in systems analysis or statistics), but much can and should be done by practising librarians. It would do practitioners a great deal of good to have to communicate their experience, knowledge and ideas to others – this is a very good way of being made to think for oneself, as well as improving one's communication skills. Mutual education/discussion courses, in which librarians taught – and criticized – one another, would benefit all concerned. Learning and teaching should also take place within each library. Learning – whether good or bad – inevitably occurs with practice, but it could be formalized. Ideally, every library of any size should be a teaching library – just as medicine is learnt in teaching hospitals (Line, 2007).

What should be sought above all is the integration of learning and practice. This, of course, requires a change in heart on the part of libraries: to practise without thinking is, if anything, worse than thinking without practice because it can do more direct damage to the library service. Many libraries are not the sort of place to teach or learn anything useful except as examples of bad practice to be avoided (Line, 2007).

There is a good deal that could be done in the interim both to improve CPD and to pave the way for something better in the future. Among some of the measures that could be taken are the involvement of related professions such as publishing in the development of curricula, the incorporation into courses of training in writing, statistical and analytical skills, much closer association with local libraries; more practical work by students, more teaching by local practising librarians, and more experimentation by the local libraries, greater emphasis on practical needs and problems, as both the starting and concluding point of all elements in the course, greater emphasis on ideas, concepts and principles, and less on theory and routine skills, much greater attention to crash and updating courses for practising librarians at all levels, organization of seminars in which practitioners would teach and learn from one another, with whatever help was required, much greater efforts on the part

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of lecturers to move back into practice. This implies greater willingness on the part of libraries to take them back into practice. None of these suggestions is at all original, radical or impracticable, though the current need to economize may make some of them very difficult to implement. Some have doubtless been acted upon already here and there. All together their impact could be considerable, although they fall far short of the ideal. It needs to be emphasized that changes in attitude and practice on the part of library practitioners are at least as necessary as on the part of educators; practitioners have generally been keener on criticizing library schools than on doing something positive to improve matters (Line, 2007).

b. Personal Competencies

Personal competencies include commitment to service excellence, seeking out challenges and sees new opportunities both inside and outside the library, having effective communications skills, plans, prioritizes and focuses on what is critical, committed to lifelong learning and personal career planning, recognizes the value of professional networking and solidarity, and is flexible and positive in a time of continuing change (Laili, 2005).

The practising librarian's attitude seems to be a key factor in participation, unless the library is large and has an established culture of funding CPD development. Some practising librarians are very willing to look for new knowledge, to attend professional events, to extend their skills in new areas, regardless of how supportive their organisation is. Their reasons may be to further themselves such as personal satisfaction, salary increase, doing the job well, improving performance, keeping up to date, and acquiring new knowledge or skills. These individuals are more likely to be members of professional associations; to contribute their own time and money; to seeking out CPD opportunities wherever they may be found (eg. generic professional courses, those offered to other professional groups, university courses run as continuing education) and to think laterally about what is available and what they need (Laili, 2005).

For others, there is an expectation that CPD will come nicely packaged, easily accessible, just in time, cheap, targeting their needs precisely, paid for by the employer, and not impinging on their life outside of work. While many employers do offer incentives to staff to participate, the above expectations are somewhat unrealistic. A desire for courses on niche or specialised topics is understandable, but is simply not feasible given the population or feasible only in main centres as the practicalities of offering CPD equitably across the country are complex. There is a failure by these individuals to look beyond what is offered to the profession – to the

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generic courses on management, leadership, customer service and so on (Laili, 2005).

The teachings in each country would progress according to the changes and developments in that country. For example, in Malaysia the establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor, Vision 2020, and the coming of the knowledge of the economy has motivated LIS educators to play their roles towards these developments (Jamaludin, 2006). In Malaysia, the Librarians Association of Malaysia oversees the CPD of member librarians. A cursory look at their website www.ppm55.org.my showed outdated information as far back as 2006 and 2007. Maybe the website would yield more information if a member of the organisation was to log into the organisation's said website.

EXAMPLES OF CPD IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

CPD in the UK is provided by three main providers namely Aslib or the Association for Information Management (www.aslib.com), TFPL (www.tfpl.com) and CILIP or the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (www.cilip.org.uk). Aslib offers courses such as organising digital information and knowledge; virtual learning environments and library/information services; electronic serials management; metadata; information literacy; strategic approach to internet research; and intricacies of Internet search tools. TFPL offers Information architecture; Internet searching; and Library portals. CILIP offers courses on metadata. All these are one-day or two-day courses, including conceptual, syntactic and semantic aspects, but not usually technical skills. The American Library Association (www.ala.org) provides for the CPD for librarians in America.

If professional development is not directly related to promotion or to a license, one can only rely on the professionalism of librarians and, at the same time, try to persuade library authorities and library directors to secure funds and leave their staff to engage in professional development (Horvat, 2004). Libraries should be obliged to allocate a percentage of their budget to continuing education of their staff and find replacement for their staff on leave (Horvat, 2004)

ARGUMENTS AGAINST CPD

It is a given need that all librarians must continually learn new skills, new tools, and new approaches to managing and providing access to information. Take the case of the systems librarian. Like all librarians, systems librarians receive formal training through pre-service education in library schools, on the job training, and professional development in the form of workshops, courses, and conferences.

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While this formal training is undoubtedly important, the ability to learn new technologies independently lies at the foundation of systems librarians' professional life, because they often have to use technologies, or make planning decisions about specific technologies, before they become common enough to be the subject of formal training sessions. People interested in entering systems librarianship have rich opportunities to develop relevant skills, experience, and attitudes outside the context of formal training. This is truer now than ever before: easily available software tools, hardware that is becoming cheaper and more powerful every day, and open standards (many driven by the versatility of XML) allow both students in library schools and new librarians to get practical experience with many of the skills that working systems librarians use every day. Most importantly, developing enthusiastic attitudes and habits toward technology by taking advantage of these opportunities will prepare people interested in systems librarianship for the constant change that will drive their daily working lives throughout their careers (Jordan, 2003).

Graduates of library schools are expected to possess professional and technical skills, interpersonal skills, computer technology skills, and therefore must be equipped with relevant Information Technology competency (Abu Bakar, 2005). It is not enough to dispatch the staff to yet another continuing education course or a conference. In order to possess successful staff performance planning, it is necessary to start with an analysis of future tasks and roles of the research library and go through these steps, that is, analysis of future tasks and roles, identification of existing competencies, development of new competencies, and priority of new tasks (Larsen, 2005).

Librarianship, like many professions, is a combination of work that appears routine and work that requires theoretical and conceptual knowledge and judgment (Rubin, 2004). Such a view does not see librarianship so much as a set of individual tasks, as it does a field that performs an essential social and political function demanding a broad understanding of the nature of knowledge, information, people, and society (Rubin, 2004).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPING SKILLS INDEPENDENTLY

Some skills necessary to librarianship are not easily developed independently. It is difficult to become proficient at project management, supervising other people, or budgeting outside the context of a job that requires such skills. However, people interested in entering systems librarianship have many opportunities to gain hands-

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on experience solving many of the problems that working systems librarians solve every day. (Jordan, 2003)

People who are interested in becoming librarians and are outside a traditional institutional setting, are not necessarily in a position to develop project management, supervisory, and teamwork skills. However, opportunities for developing other types of skills, in particular many of the practical technical skills that are so important to librarianship, are open to anyone with a connection to the Internet and a motivation to learn. At least as important as technical skills are the attitudes and traits necessary to deal with constantly changing technologies (Jordan, 2003).

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, librarianship has entered a very dynamic period, such that the librarian can only speculate on how the profession will continue to change with future technological innovations (Fourie, 2007). CPD is essential for all library personnel, professional as well as supportive, whether they remain within a position category or are preparing to move into a higher one. CPD opportunities include both formal and informal learning situations, and need not be limited to library subjects or the offerings of library schools (Chaudhary, 2001).

In the last 30 years, the role of the librarian has been subject to great changes. To some extent this has been a change of emphasis. There is an explicit recognition that it is the provision of information to users which is the driving force of the librarian's work, and that for most users the source of either is a matter of indifference (Feather, 2008). Far from eliminating the librarian, the use of technology as the basis of information service provision in institutions and agencies has highlighted the need for people with special skills who can help information-seekers (Feather, 2008). Libraries must be thought of as organisms whose purpose is to adapt, as all organisms do, to a constantly changing environment (Rubin, 2004).

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