The Changing Library Education Curriculum

Vicki L. Gregory
University of South Florida, USA

INTRODUCTION

Libraries of the 21st century are very different places from those that existed at the beginning of the 20th century, and very different as well from the libraries of only 25 years ago. Library education has striven to keep pace with all the myriads of changes. Within the last 100 years, fortunately and necessarily in order to retain its relevance, professional library education and practice has evolved from the centrality of teaching and writing the "library hand" to providing modern curricula such as services for distance learners and Web-based instruction using course management systems such as Blackboard, WebCT, and so forth. Along the way, the library profession has often been first not only to accept but also to adopt and apply the technological innovations now common to modern civilization. Throughout, library educators have paved the way to the acceptance of innovation in libraries by instructing students to use and apply new technologies.

BACKGROUND

The revolutionary changes over the past 25 years in the educational curriculum for schools of library and information science, which are necessitated by the exponential expansion of computer-based technologies, requires an almost constant and continuous reexamination of the skills and expertise that need to be acquired by the next generation of librarians. Although much has changed in libraries, the core of who we are and what we are truly remains the same. Librarianship is and will continue to be a profession devoted to bringing users and information together as effectively and efficiently as possible. To meet that ideal, librarians have used technology to enhance and create services. In addition, it is important to meet emerging educational needs of our increasingly multicultural and diverse society. Librarians have recognized that changing expectations and lean budgets require organizations to call upon the talents of everyone (Butcher, 1999). And librarians have become more engaged in teaching and research in order to serve the needs of users better (Bahr & Zemon, 2000).

Importance of People and People Skills

Computer technologies and communication systems have had an undeniable impact on society as a whole and on our profession, but it is also critical to remember the importance of the individual and of the need for interpersonal skills in our profession, which at its heart remains basically a "people profession." We harness technology for a reason—to promote learning and the dissemination of information—and we do not simply revere technology for its own sake. With the aid of computer specialists, we could design the best information system imaginable, but unless it operates in a manner that is accessible to people, nobody will use it. The ability of librarians (whether through collecting, organizing, or retrieving information) to act as intermediaries between users and the world's information resources will, in my opinion, never become outdated (Gilbert, 1998). In sum, the rapid changes in all types of libraries and the burgeoning of new technologies for librarians to learn, while increasing the amount of information that students need to have under their "academic belts" if they are to enter successfully into a library career, nevertheless remain rooted in the need to carry out the traditional librarian roles—though hopefully faster, cheaper, smarter, and more effectively.

Preparing Students in Traditional Areas of Library Responsibilities

The traditional heart and sole of a library is and remains, of course, its collections—from the time of the great Alexandrine library of the Classical era, libraries have been, in essence, civilization's repositories of learning, and hence the materials through which learning is transmitted down the generations. Current students preparing for the future (and indeed the present) electronic library cannot be permitted to overlook the continued, lasting importance of print publications in the library's carrying out of its role, but by necessity, they must be equipped to deal with the rapidly expanding world of digital medium. Thus, collection development courses must reflect an appropriately balanced approach, emphasizing the latest technology not as an end in itself, but rather as simply

another tool to use in addressing the problems arising in acquiring adequate resources for a library collection in whatever format is most appropriate for the particular library and the "task at hand" (Thornton, 2000).

As librarians and information professionals go about the process of acquiring electronic information resources in carrying out their collection development role, they must also continue to recognize and care about the important questions that have always concerned libraries, in respect to questions of future accessibility and preservation of library resources. Electronic materials—with their typical provision to libraries only through a licensing regime rather than through outright purchase—present altogether different problems for the library than do print materials. Collection development and preservation must remain an important part of the library school curriculum, no matter how dominated the library may become with electronic materials (Kenney, 2002).

In most conceptions of the libraries of the future, reference librarians may expect to continue to play many of the same reference roles that they have traditionally performed in interacting with their libraries' users. Reference librarians will continue to serve in an intermediary role to assist users in finding needed information and providing important "value-added" services through the production of instructional materials and guides to information resources. However, many of these functions, out of necessity, will be performed in media other than those that have been traditionally utilized. Collaboration and instruction may be expected to take place in a Web-based "chat" environment or by e-mail, rather than through a face-to-face meeting over the reference desk (Abels, 1996; Domas, 2001).

Reference librarians of the future must therefore acquire teaching skills as well as informational skills. They will need to be able to teach information literacy skills as students discover that just finding some online information on a topic and pushing the "print" or "download" button is not enough. In the electronic information world, librarians must be prepared to evaluate resources in a somewhat more in-depth way than was necessary when they could often depend upon refereed print journals for the majority of their information (Grassian & Kaplowitz, 2001).

In addition to all the vagaries involved with the classification and cataloging of traditional print materials, technical services librarians today, and doubtless more so in the future, will have to be prepared to cope with all the exponential varieties and forms that electronic resources may take. Technical services professionals are increasingly dealing with so many different formats and kinds of materials that may defy classification and are often not traditionally cataloged; other approaches, such as indexing and abstracting techniques and the development of in-house library-constructed databases, as well as Webliographies, may be undertaken as methods of organizing the access and retrieval process. Future graduates planning a career in the technical services areas should place a much greater focus than is presently typically allowed for in most library school curriculums on the technological aspects of information provision. Concurrently, library and information science schools need to take steps to provide for the programs and/or the courses that will include building student skills in document creation for the digital library environment. Unfortunately, all this cannot be allowed to serve as a replacement for the traditional knowledge and skills involved in cataloging and classification. As a minimum, students will need to gain a hands-on knowledge of the architecture of the infrastructure and databases behind a digital library. This means that LIS schools must develop additional specific courses, rather than trying to make room in the already overstuffed basic "organization of knowledge" classes that most schools currently offer (Vellucci, 1997).

FUTURE TRENDS

In the foreseeable future, it is probable that more and more instruction will be provided in a distance mode utilizing Web delivery, videoconferencing, and other technological means of providing instruction. A burden on many LIS faculty members at present is how to adapt a course, originally designed for a face-to-face classroom encounter to a Web-based encounter. Although the goals, objectives, and major assignments for a class might remain the same, the overall means of delivery puts more pressure on faculty members to devise new ways of delivering material (Gregory, 2003). Both virtual and print reserve materials may become problematic as distance from the home site increases. Compounding the traditional instructional component, there is the additional element of computer support on a 24-hour, 7-days-a-week basis (Young, 2002). Increasingly, when something goes wrong with the computer on a student's end, the faculty member is expected to be able to do computer troubleshooting over the telephone or by e-mail. It is common for programs and universities to provide technical support, but even so the faculty member usually gets caught up in the technical support problems, obviously much more so than when the class is taught in the traditional manner (Carey & Gregory, 2002; Newton, 2003, p. 418). Of course, when the academic computing staff person or the faculty member is unavailable, the next major organization on the campus that fields these questions is—you guessed it—the library. Librarians must be able to deal with technical, computing, or

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