

Chapter 14

The Role of the Marjorie Courtenay–Latimer Collections With Regard to Information Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The role of collections and collection development with regard to information literacy cannot be ignored. Collections are depicting knowledge and information as well as research and research patterns. These collections must be examined, revealed, and advocated for educational, recreational, cultural, and academic reasons. Information literacy refers to the awareness of information that is captured in collections; knowing where, when, and how to find it; understanding the volume of information needed; and establishing the level of sophistication of the information. Information literacy is also the ability to determine why and when information is important, how it should be applied, who can obtain it, which audience will benefit from it, and which person or institution can be approached in endeavors to obtain it.

INTRODUCTION

The art of collecting is as old as humankind itself (Theron, 1996). Posterity, commerce, survival, life, knowledge, sustainability, progress, traditions, and values are some of the motivating factors that prompt individuals to become engaged in this addictive activity (Barlow, 1984). Marsh (2004) mentioned that the urge and even obsession to collect rare and sought after items like stamps, paintings, or fashion pieces can be driven by an interest in how the item is made, its quality, and who created it. This chapter will examine the collections of Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer (hereafter Courtenay-Latimer), an eccentric figure who was an avid and compulsive collector. Courtenay-Latimer will be taken out of her microcosmic existence and brought under the spotlight of the metanarrative of the current information society.

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This will create a greater awareness and appreciation of the collections of one person and her ability to develop strategies which enabled researchers to locate, select, assess, and reflect on new discoveries in the cultural and natural history world. Courtenay-Latimer's curiosity and search for knowledge as well as her ethical participation in communities of learning, enhanced information literacy (Baxton, 2009). Her ability of collecting, preserving and storing information sources in different forms and formats, indicates her understanding of the knowledge society under which information literacy consistently flourish (Shillinglaw & Thomas, 1988).

BACKGROUND

An analysis of the collection of the East London Museum library indicates that Marjorie Eileen Doris Courtenay-Latimer was the first curator of this institution (Watson, 2004). Numerous curators of the East London Museum (hereafter Museum) acknowledge and associate the origin of their collections with Courtenay-Latimer (Bursey, 2004). These collections include the ethnographic, bird, birds' eggs, shell, and fish collections (Bursey, 2004). Courtenay-Latimer is also credited with the acquisition of other scientific cornucopia of great importance to the natural science communities, including trace fossil footprints; the coelacanth, a fish that many thought to be extinct; the so-called dodo egg, which still needs to be tested as belonging to the group *Raphuscucullatus* (Courtenay-Latimer, 1953); a human skull found near the town of Hofmeyr in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, called the Hofmeyr skull; and a fossilized reptile, *Kannemeyeriasimocephalus*, previously known as *Kannemeyeriawilsoni* broom (Courtenay-Latimer, 1948). Courtenay-Latimer's activities and collections brought her and the staff of East London Museum that are involved with information retrieval and dissemination, in direct contact with the academic community.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

A collection often ignored and never associated with Courtenay-Latimer is the library collection of East London Museum (hereafter Library). Courtenay-Latimer had a threefold influence on this collection:

- 1) As the first curator (this position was later changed to director) of the Museum she was responsible for the first collection of books for the Museum. These books were incorporated in the library collection (Jewett, 2004; Smith, 1965).
- 2) She also had an intellectual contribution to the collection by means of her research and research papers that are found in it. Numerous researchers that are based at universities and other research institutions in South Africa and globally, had, over the years, cited her contributions (Cole, 2015).
- 3) Courtenay-Latimer was also a generous donor and donated books that she received as gifts to the library. Although reference is made to articles that Courtenay-Latimer wrote (Bursey, 2000), her contribution to the scientific community that is found in the library needs to be exposed.

Reference to Courtenay-Latimer as well as contributions by her are so overwhelming in the library that it is difficult to work with the collection without realizing what an important role Courtenay-Latimer played in the enhancement of information literacy in the Eastern Cape. Her contributions to information

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