Continuing Education

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Continuing Education and the Reinvention of the Library School

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I am a practitioner, a department head at an Association of Research Libraries (ARL) library. I have also worked in the commercial sector supplying services primarily to the academic library market. What I have to say here stems from two beliefs I have formed in the course of my work experience. They have guided my actions and thinking and have crystallized into the functional equivalent of axioms. The first is that librarianship today is very much a technology-dependent discipline and so is driven by the enormous technological changes and incipient paradigm shifts swirling about us. The second is that libraries will need to adopt a much more businesslike model and develop superior management expertise. I do not accept that management of not-for-profit institutions is in any significant way different from that of for-profit ones. From these twin principles it follows that libraries are in parlous times. To prosper or even survive as a repository of "legacy documents" (old books and bound periodicals) in an environment of permanent technological turmoil, they must be able to satisfy the information needs of the future at least as well as their competitors in the information marketplace. To meet market demands will require fundamental change beyond those positive steps we

are already taking toward becoming libraries without walls. These changes in how we perform our tasks, in what we do, and, most important, in our mindset will of course not stop at the library. In the words of James J. O'Donnell, a classicist at the University of Pennsylvania, networked information "will change the economics and the landscape of higher education dramatically."¹

What is true for libraries is even more true for library schools, since their function is to train the librarians, or "knowledge workers," of the future. It will be my thesis in this column, first, that library schools must change radically and, second, that a commitment to reinvigorated continuing education (CE) may represent an excellent, if difficult, first step for a library school ready to redefine what it does.

As the following examples illustrate, the issues raised by technological progress and our need to redefine or reinvent what we do extend beyond the library profession and library schools. At the October 1995 meeting of the Society of Information Management, Warren McFarlan of the Harvard Business School told the gathered corporate computer managers that there were only twenty good years left in their profession. The reason is disintermedia-

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tion, the freeing of the information consumer from the intermediary of the information technology (IT) and library professional, which will result from the increasing technical sophistication of users.² Joseph Morone, the new dean of the Lally School of Management and Technology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, states that most business schools are obsolete because the marketplace is being transformed by a technological revolution.³ Even programs in information and computer science are being criticized for the inadequate skill levels possessed by recent graduates, and a national task force is working on a revised model curriculum in a project named IS95.⁴ While these issues are not library specific, it could be argued that library professionals are more vulnerable than others, such as IT professionals. Library schools, after all, have long been criticized for teaching too little of use on the job. A recent issue of *Technical Services Quarterly* echoes the perennial complaint: "[L]ibrary schools do little (if anything) to prepare future catalogers to do serials cataloging."⁵ Indeed this complaint and similar ones will assume increasing force as what is taught in library school falls further and further behind the real needs of practitioners. A recent survey of ARL members indirectly tackles the question of the worth of a library school degree. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents stated they would consider hiring applicants without the M.L.S. degree; 110 of 750 professional openings in the previous three years had been filled by "non-M.L.S. professionals." A full re-

port on this survey is contained in ARL SPEC Kit 212, which concludes:

As librarianship continues to debate the scope and content of its knowledge base and attendant educational requirements, librarians are left to promote, if not protect, their profession with a less than clearly articulated sense of what constitutes librarianship as a distinct profession.

Our need for knowledge, particularly new knowledge, has never been greater. This is because our profession is losing to obsolescence the core set of practical principles that once defined it. These losses appear to be occurring faster than the rate of change in library school curricula. And since librarianship is no longer, and perhaps never was, a professional discipline in the usual sense, library CE on the model of continuing medical education for physicians is out of the question. For if the basic competencies required for library practice are in flux, and what we have been taught is becoming obsolete, the very existence of the traditional library school will be highly problematic. Thus the notorious aversion of librarians for CE—at least that available from library schools—may have a rational basis. Since library schools cannot supply what we need, we simply get it elsewhere or do without.

It is clear to me that only those library schools reinvented pretty much from the ground up in response to the present and future needs of practitioners will succeed in their educational mission and survive. Before turning my

attention to concrete suggestions for products, let me suggest a general point of departure for this reinvention. Library schools would do well to abandon the model of intellectual work inherited from the nineteenth-century German seminar, that of the Ph.D. research scholar, generally working alone, adding permanent bricks to the edifice of learning. We can no longer sustain the notion of a single library discipline, with new advances building on previous ones. We must become conversant with a large number of rapidly changing disciplines, over which we will have no control or ownership. For example, World Wide Web technology has come from outside library science and has quickly been embraced by the library world. But while there is a present need for library specialists in WWW technology, there may no longer be such a need in a few years when the successors to Web browsers have taken root.

This frozen inward-looking intellectual model gave rise to the discipline of library science and still affects to some extent the ethos of academic librarians, many of whom still go through the tenure process. I recommend instead the model used in the engineering and business disciplines, which recognizes the primacy of the practical intelligence responding to a dynamically changing world of new tools and new kinds of technology. This is not a new idea. Nor is it just a rehash of the tired old—and false—opposition between theory and practice. Let me cite Axel F. Enström, of the Swedish Institute of Technology, who wrote at the turn of the century:

I maintain that what has appeared to be too much theory is instead too little theory, that is to say young engineers have a great deal of knowledge which is called theory, but this consists largely of rigid theory, dead knowledge. I have arrived

at the definite opinion that our present scientific education is inadequate in the light of modern requirements. By science I do not mean what many people mean, the involvement with mathematics and formulae . . . I would go so far as to say that a cobbler could be a scientist in his field. A person involved in practical work, an engineer or a cobbler, may, by reflecting on his work or his experience, achieve insights which can be compared with learning ready-made theories.⁶

If there are to be successor disciplines to library science, there must be a prominent place for Enström's scientific cobblers and engineers. These people should be recognized as experts, and their recruitment is a *sine qua non* of the revitalized library school. Many of these people are in engineering and business faculties; this fact should not deter their recruitment for library or information offerings. Many others are consultants working outside the university structure, are instructor-trainers in corporate "universities," or work in libraries or library consortia or utilities. Some will be certified trainers in Total Quality Management (TQM) or possess other desirable special skills. It cannot be long before an entrepreneurial library school offers academic homes to the best of these people, holding out the opportunity to ply their trade, maintain their usual income, and at the same time contribute to the university. Some could be in residence on campus. Many would not, particularly those who would conduct training sessions around the country or by means of distance education. I would strongly advise against forcing them into the usual faculty Ph.D. tenure-track researcher mold. Nontenured but permanent clinical physicians coexist nicely in medical schools with tenured full-time researchers. There is no reason why li-

library schools cannot forge a similar arrangement. Similarly, the implicit assumption that most courses must be taught by a single instructor resident in the library school should be questioned. I can see great advantage in library schools' brokering experts wherever they can be found and adding value by creating marketable new products.

What then are the prospects for entrepreneurial library schools with respect to CE? Let me make a few suggestions. First, because so much of our knowledge is rapidly becoming obsolete and the useful half-life of what we learn is often five years or less, I would recommend always designing CE products based on what is likely to be needed in five years as well as what is needed now. Consistent with the new academic model recommended above, the new products should not necessarily be "owned" by a tenured faculty member. Team ownership as well as team teaching are appropriate. Many if not most should be designed by the library school management, and appropriate experts recruited as needed to fill specific roles. Second, because of the intense competitive environment and the fact that existing library schools are generally not very competitive, I recommend an initial strategy based on niche marketing. The goal should be to identify empty niches to fill, as it would be futile to go head-to-head with an established presence. An example to avoid is GE in the 1960s attempting to compete with IBM simply by claiming its computers were superior. Be dead serious about identifying the incentives that would motivate people like me to want CE and choose a particular CE product, as well as the disincentives. Successful niche marketing hinges on developing value-added custom education programs and courses tailored to real needs. Library schools need to practice the customer orientation they should be

preaching. A reinvented library school should be able to develop new products as quickly and as successfully as Toyota does a new model or a new kind of motor vehicle. Marketing research techniques, surveys, and focus groups are all useful tools. Graduates, old as well as recent, particularly those who no longer work in libraries, and the people who hire graduates should be among the groups heavily surveyed. Recently I have seen several messages on listservs boiling down to: "I am a book cataloger. I have recently been asked to catalogue serials and feel lost. Can anyone help?" A short distance course or self-study materials would fill this particular niche.

Just as important as the content of a CE product is the packaging, such as how, when, where, and by whom the product is delivered. The increasing practicality of distance learning means that continuing education can be brought to the student-customer. Making it available when needed might fill an empty niche and increase acceptance in the marketplace. Convenient sessions could be offered before or after library conferences. This is the approach of the library school at Long Island University, which has timed its two summer institutes to attract those attending the summer 1996 ALA conference in New York City. Self-study materials would be very popular, particularly computer-based instruction for the more technical subjects. Abandoning the one-size-fits-all approach would lead beyond CE as we know it to programs and certificates customized to the individual level.⁷ And if we extend the range of potential customers to include individual libraries or library systems, a new range of consulting and training services would open. These consulting services could range from assistance in choosing a library system to periodic cultural and

other audits, seminars on an as-needed basis, planning a migration to a new-generation library system. The vision statement of the IBM Rochester business unit, winner of the 1990 Baldridge Quality Award, says something we all should take very much to heart: "[T]he niches *are* the market and the ultimate niche is the individual customer."⁸

An overview of the competitive environment reveals a great deal of competition. First of all there are the library conferences and Internet listservs, which can be extraordinarily helpful in practice. The ARL Office of Management Services offers a series of very good short management courses. Some of the most formidable competitors are extension divisions and academic departments outside the library school. Several examples will suggest the variety of what is available. Short extension courses on technical topics relating to PCs and networking are very popular. The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Engineering Professional Development offered a tempting two-day course on standard generalized markup language (SGML) publishing in January 1996. The course was advertised over the Internet. The instructors were not academics but published consultants and practitioners. They have credibility few library school faculty can match. The faculty of law at the University of Montreal has organized an SGML conference at which Charles Goldfarb, the father of SGML, will be the keynote speaker. The competition extends far beyond academic institutions. CAPCON, a library network in the Washington, D.C., area, is offering nine CE workshops this spring. All classes will take place in CAPCON's Training and Education Center and will be conducted by "nationally known instructors." Only one of the eleven instructors is a library school faculty member. Another example is the SGML Author So-

lutions Conference sponsored by Microsoft, January 31-February 2, 1996. There are well established ways to receive any of the four Microsoft technical certificates or a Lotus Notes certificate or become a certified Novell engineer, all of which would be marvelous on a systems librarian's résumé. Other competitors are private companies offering training services. They usually travel around the country, making attendance less expensive. One company increases its credibility by offering training materials published by Que. So far my examples have been technical, but there is just as much, if not more, competition on management training.

Following are a few ideas for new products that might answer market needs.

One possibility is a library systems certificate that means the holder is actually able to perform a broad range of technical tasks. The program might encompass both general computer technology as well as library applications of that technology. For instance, the student could receive a solid grounding in Internetworking and network management with an emphasis on LANs and tcp/ip, be encouraged or required to get a Microsoft or Novell certificate, gain a basic competence in WWW, HTML, CGI, perl, as well as some basic programming using Visual Basic for Applications, C++, or an application macro language. An exposure to client/server would be a real bonus. Of course there should also be a *thorough* grounding in all aspects of one or more of the major systems, such as Innovative, Data Research, Ameritech, or Sirsi. (As an aside, I wonder how library schools can possibly justify not having one or more of these systems in their labs.) Cataloging practice and the MARC formats from the perspective of noncatalogers could complete this program. I would

think that a bachelor's degree, preferably in a technical field, and a year or two of library systems experience should be required for admission, *but not the M.L.S.* Most of the instruction could be done asynchronously by distance, with minimal required time on a campus. Or the instructors could be brought to the students.

Another product idea is not particularly new: a library management certificate. I would investigate including some of the content required for the library systems certificate discussed above, supplemented by management topics such as cultural change (in my view the number-one problem in libraries); organizational behavior and change or transformation management; CQI or TQM; spreadsheets, databases, statistics, techniques of surveying users; communication skills. Both certificates would need to be refreshed every few years and so would lead to new CE products.

For the past fifteen years, the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Library and Information Studies Continuing Education Services (CES) has been offering a certificate of professional development consisting of two-day seminars. Designed as a cohesive curriculum of continuing education, this program has offered seminars in management, automation, technological applications, library buildings, archives, and a variety of topical electives. CES will receive the LITA/Library Hi-tech Award at ALA-New York for its "record of providing continuing education in information technology over many years." Practitioners, vendors, and consultants have been teaching in this program since its inception.

More attention should be paid to technology management, which has become a growth discipline. Enrollment in traditional computer science programs has been dropping by as much as

50 percent over the last ten years. Institutions like MIT are graduating fewer computer science majors, showing a 45 percent drop from 1983 to 1995. Students in this new field, which the University of South Carolina calls computer information systems, take a balanced program of technical computer science and business courses.⁹ MIT, Stanford, and others offer master's degrees.¹⁰ Many of us would benefit from a good introduction to this new discipline.

Let us turn to another area ripe for CE products. Libraries and library vendors are forging many new partnerships and creating new services. Libraries are increasingly going out to bid for new and old services. Library literature is very weak on the subject of bidding. A quick CE seminar on the collective wisdom of how to write good requests for proposal, requests for quotation, and the like, would answer a big need. This would lead into negotiating skills and how to cost out and evaluate vendor proposals. Just as interesting would be a course or series of courses on how to select a library systems vendor, beginning with the identification of local needs and getting consulting help and extending to negotiating a really good contract. How to select a consultant or systems integrator and how to negotiate the contract might make another very marketable product.

A final idea, an old-fashioned one: a book summarizing new developments applicable to the library field. Most of these will come from outside the field. Such a book could be published under the aegis of a library school or a professional association. A model might be the American Marketing Association's *Marketing Encyclopedia: Issues and Trends Shaping the Future*, edited by Jeffrey Heilbrunn (1995). For this book fifty prominent practitioners, consultants, and academicians were invited to

contribute articles of an average of six pages summarizing their expertise on timely subjects. The emphasis is on handling the challenges of the future. The editor's introduction recommends: "Use this book as an update course in marketing; use it as a source of ideas; use it as a way to constantly challenge your thinking about how you do business." This book contains articles about new product development, creativity in marketing, positioning, and others that are very pertinent to a library school seeking to come up with good new CE products. A book like this on library topics would prove a positive force in the profession. It too, could, of course, be updated every few years.

References and Notes

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