

Priorities and Concerns for Education and Research in Library and Information Science

1 What is the field that we're talking about?

Although I'm here because I'm the president of ASIST, I should caution you that what I'm going to say ought not to be taken as an official position of that organization. Rather, although clearly influenced by my office and my concerns for ASIST and its members, my remarks will perhaps be most strongly reflective of some 30 years of experience as an educator and researcher in library and information science. Having said this, I would like to begin my presentation by reminding you that by far the largest single group within ASIST, classified by educational background and/or professional position, is librarians, or educators in schools of library and/or information science. But, librarians, or educators, whose concerns are with the broad area of information in a variety of contexts, not necessarily limited to the institution of the library.

So, when I speak of the field of library and information science, I refer to a single, problem-oriented discipline, with both professional and research components, whose aim is to support people (and here I mean individuals, groups, organizations and societies) in achieving their goals (which could include managing their problems, for instance), through providing appropriate access to information. Clearly, this defines a quite broad field, with rather fuzzy boundaries, which may be becoming ever fuzzier as our social, economic and cultural context changes.

For much of human history, there has been a single institution and a single profession (and scholarly enterprise) that have directly addressed this problem: the library; and, librarians, at times with the assistance of bibliographers, encyclopedists, and related scholars. However, at least since the end of the 19th century, both the institutions and the groups concerned with this problem have been steadily expanding, as the nature of the information available to humankind has changed, and as the role of information in society has changed. It is, I think, a legitimate and important question to ask whether it is realistic any longer to believe that there is a single field which addresses this problem, or whether we should accept that there are many different fields concerned with different aspects of the problem.

I'd like to contend, and I believe that this is reflective of the general view of the membership of the ASIST, that we can still think of a single field, defined by the problem I've identified, whose basic theories, principles, and ethical premises, can be applied, both in research and practice, to all the disparate contexts in which that problem arises. I'm quite willing (as are my colleagues in the department of library and information science at Rutgers) to call this field "library and information science", largely for historical and pragmatic reasons, but also because libraries, in one form or another, remain the most significant institution in our society which addresses this problem. So, although I'm also quite willing to call the field just plain information science, or whatever names other places or organizations concerned with this problem choose to call it, I'll stick with this label for the purposes of this discussion.

2 Some priorities for education in library and information science

In the preceding plenary session, we heard a number of distinct positions on the shape and focus of library and information science, and on its development, in particular with respect to

education. I'd like here to add my two cents worth to this discussion, based on my previous remarks.

The first priority for education in library and information science is the recognition that the basic goal of such education is deep understanding of the fundamental principles of the field, on which practice (or research) is based. This needs to be recognized at all levels of education for library and information science. Of course, this assumes that there are such principles which can apply to the wide range of contexts with which we are concerned. Please note that I don't mean to suggest that any such principles are immutable; rather, I'll suggest here that they can be thought of as associated with several different basic facets or themes of the field, and that they are subject to change as our knowledge changes, and as our understanding of the contexts to which our field is applicable expands. The themes that I'll name are roughly those on which our curricula at Rutgers are based, but I really don't expect much argument with them. They are:

- human interactions with information
- organization of information
- access to information
- structures of knowledge and information
- information technologies
- management of information organizations
- information and society

I believe that it's safe to say that various aspects of these themes have been, and continue to be, the major foci of both practice and research in library and information science, and that our field has developed, and is continuing to develop, general principles within each of these themes which can be applied in a wide variety of contexts (for instance, facet analysis in the case of organization of information).

The second priority is to recognize that practices based upon principles may be specific to different contexts, and that the role of education in library and information science is twofold:

- to enable students to understand how the basic principles can be applied in different contexts; and,
- to provide basic knowledge of practices in specific contexts that are appropriate to particular career goals.

These two goals suggest that, for education in library and information science, knowledge of general principles should then be followed by understanding of specific practices with particular domains or contexts. However, it is clear that it is unrealistic to expect a graduate of any particular library and information program immediately to be competent in all of the practices of that specific sub-field; rather, the goal should be that the student be prepared to understand and learn the practices of that sub-field.

This leads us to a third priority for education in library and information science: recognition that learning is a life-long activity, and that education is the joint responsibility of the academy and the profession. As my friend and colleague Virgil Blake has said, "there's a reason they call it commencement." Education in our field, as in any profession, does not stop with the granting of a degree; that moment merely expresses confidence in the ability of the student to become an excellent practitioner (or educator, or researcher). A corollary to this priority is that formal education in library and information science must take account of the fact of rapid and

continuing change in the information milieu. What follows from this, is that formal education should be primarily concerned with developing the knowledge and skills to cope with such change, rather than with the detailed skills associated with any particular practice at any particular time.

My final priority for education in library and information science is that educators and professionals recognize the diversity of contexts in which our problem arises, and to which our field's body of knowledge is relevant, and the consequent diversity of professional practice which therefore arises. We clearly are doing this already, with the increasing number of educational institutions which offer undergraduate, as well as masters and doctoral programs, and the increasing number of titles of degrees which our educational institutions are offering. This increasing diversity should not be seen as reflecting opposition to, or neglect of previous fields of practice or concern (for instance, libraries), but rather as expansion of our understanding of the relevance of our field to society at large. A natural consequence of such expansion is, of course, enrichment of knowledge and practice in all of the various areas. It is especially this aspect of our changing environment that we, as educators and practitioners in library and information science should be taking advantage of.

3 Some priorities for research in library and information science

It surprises me that I find that I have relatively little to say on the topic of research priorities in library and information science today, since I have thought of myself as primarily a researcher throughout my career. I guess that this is the case for two reasons: one is that I think that it is both presumptuous and counter-productive to direct others in their research activities; the other is that, on the evidence presented at, for instance, this meeting, especially at the poster sessions, research in library and information science is currently in a great state. Not only are we finding new and fruitful ways to address our old problems, but we are finding new problems to address, new questions to answer, and new ways to answer them. We are incorporating in our research theories and methods of other fields in exciting and important ways, and we are collaborating with other fields in order to fruitfully address a whole variety of issues that had been previously thought to be beyond our purview. Importantly, the results of research in our field are increasingly being understood as relevant in a much broader context than has been the case in the past. For instance, I find it not coincidental that Google is a direct result of NSF's research initiative in digital libraries. As another example, the continuing trend of integration of research in information behavior and research in information retrieval speaks well for the current state of our research activity. If I were to identify a priority for research in library and information science, it would be that research continue to expand its horizons, to embrace new models and methods, and, especially, to become increasingly interdisciplinary. After all, it is the problem that we are concerned with that should be our focus, and not the discipline that we call ourselves.

4 In conclusion

I think that the sentiment just expressed could be just as easily be applied to education for library and information science, as to research, so I guess that it's appropriate for me to stop here. Thank you for your attention.