

Information Science Practice in a Historical Perspective: Preliminary Findings of an Oral History Project

Ellen Pozzi

Department of Library and Information Science, School of Communication, Information and Library Studies, Rutgers University, 4 Huntington Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA. Email: epozzi@scils.rutgers.edu.

Marija Dalbello

Department of Library and Information Science, School of Communication, Information and Library Studies, Rutgers University, 4 Huntington Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA. Email: dalbello@scils.rutgers.edu.

Oral history is a phenomenological method of historical inquiry. It is applied to the study of the organizational field of information science through interviews with members of the New Jersey chapter of the national information science organization (ASIST). Their views on the identity of the chapter and their own professional identity in that context, and on the development and maturation of information science field over the past thirty years are considered in the sociology of culture framework. This approach can open new directions for historical inquiry of information science in the national context, understanding the research / practice dynamics, and the institutionalization of information science field.

Introduction

Historical research is not limited to documents; it goes beyond description of facts as reconstructed to capture the construction of history itself. The aim of this paper is to focus on the organizational field of information science to explore the history of the field and the connections of information science research and practice from a phenomenological perspective. It uses an oral history method to preserve and capture the meanings, interpretations, within organizational field, and cognitive authority provided by the subjective experience of the members of a regional chapter of the national organization of information scientists. Although the primary goal of this project was to create an original historical document by collecting interviews about the history of the New Jersey chapter of ASIST (1975-2005), it also uses this new primary source to study the development of information science in the organizational context of a local chapter. The interviews enabled an insight into the shaping of the field by a community of practice and the negotiation of its meanings over time. Thus, in addition to factual reconstruction of the history of information science by means of documentary methods, this study provides an insight into history by means of interpretive perspectives of the context of development, dynamics of the field and interacting forces in a diachronic perspective. Through the phenomenological approach to historical reconstruction, an oral history method allowed us to capture social and personal meanings (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, 61) attached to information science as a field of practice and research from 1975 to date.

Relevant Research

The application of the sociology of culture (DiMaggio & Powell 1986; Dalbello (2005, 2005a)), the institutionalization of the information science field, and an oral history method as tool for historiography (Denzin & Lincoln 1998; Dudley 1998; Yow 1994) provided the theoretical and methodological framework for this study. The oral history method generated data that were used to consider a broader context of information science field while explaining change in the local environment from a historical perspective (Shopes 2005). The structuring of organizational fields with regard to innovation and institutionalization is considered from the point of view of three different mechanisms of isomorphism, originating from the coercive pressures of society, mimetic processes within organizational fields, and cognitive authority of professional groups.

The Study

This paper presents initial results from the oral history project conducted from October through December 2004. The interviews were collected from nine leaders and members of the New Jersey chapter of ASIST. The

participants were selected to represent leadership of the chapter; the respondents had diverse educational backgrounds, career paths in information science, gender (5 female, 4 male) and periods of active involvement with the chapter (3 participants were the founding officers of the chapter). The archives of the chapter provided the background for identifying networks of individuals who were involved with the organization for an extended period of time and as chairs from its most active periods.

Research Objectives

In addition to filling the gaps about the history of the chapter in the archives (1975-1985) the major research objectives of this oral history project were to:

- (1) Identify key events and transformative periods in the history of the chapter (as seen by the participants)
- (2) Understand the role of local and national organization in defining information science community in the area
- (3) Identify elements of the environment that were perceived as crucial for the chapter development
- (4) Understand how participants defined their identity as information scientists

Data Collection

The first-hand narratives were collected through semi-structured interviews that lasted from 60-90 minutes. The interviews were taped. The interview questions were shared with the participants beforehand.

Initial Findings

The emerging themes from the participants' points of view are focused on:

- Professional identity
- Chapter identity
- Maturation of the organization
- Origin of the chapter

The participants from an early era of the organization identify a shift in membership and an increasingly theoretical focus of the chapter over time. This focus moved the organization further apart from the Special Libraries Association (SLA). The SLA group was perceived as preserving the practical connection to the field while the information scientists saw themselves as encompassing and crossing fields. Changes were perceived as integral to technology innovation in the larger socio-technical context to which information scientists respond by seeking solutions outside practices established by the library institution. Although the founders of the chapter could recall the story of its origin, later members had little interest or notion of why or when the chapter was founded. This was not important to them and the identity of the chapter was not founded on a common myth of origin but on the idea of innovation and their role as innovators. The members did recall particular meetings and events that were seen as part of some golden age of the chapter (in 1980s) but overall there is only a present identity and not a past identity for these individuals.

The identity is seen as negotiated and shared with the SLA, but also distinct from its practical concerns. The organization is seen as a "place" to manage uncertainty and change in the environment. These individuals saw it as a place to explore ideas in a non-competitive environment and a place for continuing education but also a kind of borderlands that brings together practitioners, information science students and academics. This collaboration is seen as unique and a strength of the chapter. The fact that SLA is practical and ASIST is theoretical comes up over and over again in these narratives, framed differently but clearly a marker of chapter and professional identity.

The analysis is at an early stage. Further analysis will identify how organizational field of information science as has been shaped in a local context through impact of broader social processes from the point of view of the participants. They will be interpreted in terms of coercive pressures (related to society at large), mimetic processes (related to perceived legitimacy and efficiency) and normative pressures (related to requirements of the professional field) that shaped that process (DiMaggio and Powell 1986, 150-152). We also aim to situate the organization of New Jersey chapter of ASIST in the larger historical context of the specialized industries in New Jersey (telecommunications and pharmaceuticals).

Conclusion

This oral history project revealed perspectives that are not found in written historical documents. These perspectives provide an understanding of the transformation and development of information science as an

organizational field “as it happened” for those who were the builders of an institutional infrastructure for information science that brought together research and practice interests over a period of thirty years. Recovering historical perspectives on the chapter development through the voices of oral history project provided insights that existing sketchy official records deposited with the chapter archives could not reveal. These subjective accounts opened new directions for research of information science field in the New Jersey area. Because data collection can be replicated in other contexts, our research has potential for combining this history with other existing chapter archives and written documents to create a complete narrative of the institutionalization of information science in the national context. We hope that our findings will have implications for programming of chapter activities.

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