Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Commentary

Shaping the Information Professional of the Future

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A New Arena and its Areas of Competence

During the last two decades we have seen extensive changes in society and an explosive development in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Those changes have been both rapid and global, and there are no indications that the rate of change will slow down in the medium-term future. In the process, a new and different arena for library and information services has developed, one placing new demands on the skills of information professionals. Information has never before been this widely and easily accessible. Even so, people demand increasingly faster and easier access to information and information services, regardless of form, time or location.

Library and information science education must be both sustainable and renewable. The skills that LIS students acquire today should be relevant also in 2040, since they can anticipate a professional life of approximately 30-35 years after completing their degrees. This sounds slightly absurd given the rate of

change we have seen so far, and highlights the fact that a persistent renewal of skills, i.e., continuing professional education, is required in addition to the original LIS degree. The pedagogical issues involved in this include both individual and organizational learning and skills development. Evidence based library and information practice is a viable strategy for renewal of one's knowledge base, while at the same time making one's original education sustainable.

In only 15 years the World Wide Web has created a completely different information landscape, penetrating into everyday life much faster than television did in the 1950s. The new LIS arena comes as a result of this and many other ICT developments. Other factors, mainly socioeconomic, have been instrumental in creating this new arena, but in my opinion the web has been the single most powerful driving force. The information sector without digital technologies is completely unthinkable today. Digital technology not only has vastly improved information searching, but also provides us with an unsurpassed

diversity of information tools and media. In this new arena, books, journals, and other old media are reborn as digital information, often directly available to users through online venues. Regardless of format, users demand and expect that all the information and entertainment on the Web is fully and instantly accessible.

Who today needs a library when Google and Amazon have replaced bibliographical databases as search tools? Access to information *about* documents and other media is no longer good enough, not when users want the real thing - be it the full text, music file, or downloadable images - instantly. A vast majority of information seekers find Google sufficient for their needs, which suggests that libraries and information services face a real threat of being marginalised due to an inability to fully exploit the Web's potential. Mobile phones, e-mail, blogs, Twitter, chat, YouTube, Facebook, and many more, are standard tools for communication and information sharing today. In the new arena there is tangible competition for the attention of information users, and library services must be attractive enough to ensure that users remain actively interested. Libraries must position themselves at the forefront and make relevant use of the whole range of new technologies in order to make information accessible in the formats and ways that users prefer. In addition, libraries have to be flexible and meet the expectations of their users by being available around the clock, and must be highly visible in the social media forums where users operate. Many libraries have already come a long way to meet the requirements of the new arena, are increasingly accessible and interacting with their users, but much remains to be done.

Skills Requirements in the New Arena

It is essential that educators have a good notion of what skills will be required in the medium-term future. The competencies considered necessary for librarians today and tomorrow might be defined on several levels, from overall professional skills to personal qualities. The underlying assumption is that all professional skills must be theoretically anchored and based on research evidence. I have identified six areas of competence required for the new arena that are applicable in a wide range of tasks and contexts. Multi-tasking capacity and social skills always have been crucial for information professionals and still are, but today the communication initiative no longer rests with users alone. Now librarians have to be proactive in their efforts to interact with users.

> 1. First and foremost, excellent social skills are required. Efficient teamwork with colleagues and users goes beyond merely getting along – it is required for successful service development. Social skills are increasingly important when information services are organized for project-oriented work and to increase user interactivity.

> 2. Being able to communicate well with users will continue to be vital for information professionals. They must push to develop interactive communication tailored to user preferences, and keep up-to-date with new technologies and implement multiple means of user communication in order to keep users engaged.

> 3. Information management skills will be equally important in the future as today. Increased accessibility is pointless without relevant knowledge organization and information management tailored to meet users' needs.

> 4. Excellent ICT skills are compulsory for information professionals. Most of the new librarians were born digital, placing them on an equal footing with users their own age. The greatest challenge is to continue to learn new technologies and make them professionally useful.

5. Openness to change is a crucial aspect, given that the rate of change is not expected to slow over the medium-term. Librarians whose professional knowledge is theory-based rather than skills-based tend to be more flexible and willingly embrace change. This is because a theoretical knowledge base is focused on content, which is sustainable, rather than form and tools, which are likely to change often.

6. Finally, strategic competence is also essential for applying a holistic, process-oriented view on all professional activities. Continued success requires an understanding of the goals, objectives, and future development of the institution.

LIS in Theory and Practice

In 1993, Sweden's former bias towards vocational training was replaced by Master's programmes in Library and Information Science, and integrated into the formal national university system. The scientific basis required in all areas of higher education is a guarantee for knowledge that allows generalization, making it sustainable. A fully academic education in library and information science has to place the emphasis on theory rather than practice. In preparing students for future skills requirements, LIS educators must integrate theoretical and applied knowledge, and ensure that student' learning alternates between the two. LIS theory can be supplemented by field studies and by visiting lecturers who are active information professionals. This interplay of theory and practice will help students to develop a professional attitude and identity. However, it is not uncommon that LIS students perceive the practice oriented elements of their education to be the most important. The underlying assumption appears to be that practice is where you really learn to be a librarian.

Many students seem to believe that the theoretical knowledge they possess is not valued in professional practice. If this belief is widespread, and not just particular to Swedish LIS students, we have a serious attitude problem in our professional field, a problem with clear implications for evidence based practice. Swedish librarians who graduated before 1993 often have inadequate theoretical knowledge in their professional subject area. Since many of the librarians that new LIS students meet belong to this category, this could influence the students' perceptions of the importance of a theoretical foundation. This is also an issue for career perceptions and life-long professional learning.

A proactive LIS education should provide future information professionals with what we might call a "quintessential knowledge kit". The knowledge included in this kit is applicable in a wide range of tasks and contexts and constitutes core professional competencies:

- Comprehension of how information is sought for, disseminated, and shared between people and within organizations;
- The ability to manage information and render it meaningful and accessible for potential users;
- The ability to devise systems or methods for extracting new knowledge from information sources;
- Comprehension of the tactical and strategic importance of information in various contexts.

Comparing the knowledge kit and the list of six skills areas required in the new LIS arena, we find that they differ in the level of abstraction but are otherwise reasonably compatible. The first two items on the list, social skills and communication skills, are necessary for application of all the elements of the knowledge kit, especially the first two. Item three on the skills list - information management skills - correlates well with the first two elements of the knowledge kit. Item four – ICT skills – is required for applications

of the first three elements of the kit, and item six – strategic competence – represents the essence of the last element of the kit. Item five on the skills list, openness to change, correlates to all and none. This item carries very great importance, as an attitude that LIS education can foster in students, but it is difficult to define as a knowledge element or skill per se.

Life-long Professional Learning and Library Careers

Most people do not become librarians in order to make spectacular careers. When they enter library school, many LIS students perceive the physical library as the opposite of stressful and busy, notions frequently linked to career perceptions. They change opinion after having met with the practice first-hand, but their attitudes on career planning often remain unaltered. I see a clear correlation between career planning and skills development. In both cases it is essential for the development of a professional identity to be explicitly aware of one's individual qualities, competencies, and professional goals.

Career consciousness requires the ability to formulate succinctly what you know, what you can do, and what you want to do. It is useful to practice verbalizing one's skills, by, for example, trying to describe to non-information professionals how you handle tasks at work. The ability to present a comprehensible job description is necessary when it comes to promoting oneself in a career context, and it is important to include both personal qualities and professional skills. Personal qualities like communication skills, empathy, inventiveness and flexibility, and many more are crucial – and very attractive – in the job market.

Discussion about skills development should start from a holistic view of the competence present, or missing, in the organization. The visions that library leaders strive to implement in order to profile their operations often demand that individual staff and the organization as a whole hone their skills. The organization's visions, goals and objectives indicate what kind of librarians the library needs, and highlight what areas of competence should be developed further. Strategic planning for developing the services of a library could be regarded as career planning on an organizational level. Skills development on this level benefits from teamwork and project-oriented approaches, coupled with a work environment that encourages learning. Continuous organizational and professional development should be based on scientific evidence in order to be sustainable.

Future information professionals need not only great social and ICT skills, but also a wide range of traditional library competencies. A massive generation shift is under way in the information sector as many librarians head for retirement. The collective and individual knowledge they possess is literally invaluable for the professional field of practice, and we need to find viable strategies to transfer this knowledge to their successors. Libraries and information services designed as learning organizations are better prepared to manage this, whereas those that are not will face difficulties.

This paper has addressed aspects that are crucial in shaping the information professionals we need in the medium-term future. In identifying the skills required in the new arena of the information sector, we discover implications for the practising information professional in terms of skills development and for LIS education.

Implications for practice

- Individual and institutional levels of professional skills development constitute two types of library careers, and go hand-in-hand.
- The more successful the organization, the more room there is for individual success. For the individual, the reward for life-long learning is a gratifying career; for the institution, the reward is a learning organization.

- Openness to change is key among six skills areas identified for the new arena. Those able to cope with change have a solid theoretical LIS knowledge base, plan their work experience with a clear vision of their future, and possess an eagerness to learn.
- Evidence based practice is a natural mode for professionals who are open to change.

Implications for LIS education

- Library schools must take responsibility for recruiting and educating students to provide them with academic, professional, and personal skills that future practice demands.
- Carefully deliberated recruitment criteria and integration of theoretical and applied professional knowledge are cornerstones for sustainable LIS education.
- It is essential to impress upon students the importance of maintaining and updating one's knowledge throughout professional life.