Supporting LIS Education Through Practice[1]
Dr. Loriene Roy
Professor, School of Information, The University of Texas at Austin
Professor, Center for Women's and Gender Studies, The University of Texas at Austin
President-Elect, American Library Association

Practice in LIS Curricula

Service-based education has been a part of library and information science (LIS) curricula since its origin. When Melvil Dewey designed the curriculum for the first School of Library Economy at Columbia in 1896, he acknowledged that "lectures and reading alone will not achieve the best results in training for librarianship without the conference, problems, study of various libraries in successful operation, and actual work in a library."[2]

The curricula of other early LIS schools and training programs reflected Dewey's philosophy.[3] Beginning in 1907, students at the Illinois Library School at the University of Illinois were encouraged to embark on a month of fieldwork in public libraries across the state.[4] For many students, their month in the public libraries of Bloomington, Decatur, Jacksonville, Joliet, or Rockford was their first experience in a library other than that at the University of Illinois.[5] Katharine Lucinda Sharp, Director of the Illinois Library School from 1897-1907, predicted that the students would "look back upon these early experiences as the most interesting in [their] career[s]."[6] In 1909 Hazeltine wrote of the two-month practicum arranged for students at the Wisconsin Library School, "arrangements for field practice are not only a gain for the students, but are beneficial to general library advancement in the state."[7] Charles Knowles Bolton, the librarian at the Brookline (Massachusetts) Public Library, reminded librarians, "It is the duty of every man to set apart some of his time and strength to be devoted to the welfare of the community in which he lives."[8] He noted that service brought mutual rewards: "No

---

[1] I would like to acknowledge Sara Albert's assistance in the preparation of this paper.
[2] Dewey, Melvil, "School of Library Economy at Columbia College," The Library Journal 9 (7) (July 1894): 118.
[3] Roy, Loriene, "Personality, Tradition and Library Spirit: A Brief History of Librarian Education," in Library and Information Studies Education in the United States, ed. Loriene Roy and Brooke Sheldon (London: Mansell, 1998): 1-15.
[4] Grotzinger, Laurel A., The Power and the Dignity: Librarianship and Katharine Lucinda Sharp (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1966).
[5] Roy, Loriene, "Library Spirit: The Library School Experience and Early Professional Work During Progressive Era Texas and Illinois. A Reader's Theatre Performance," 1996, ERIC, ED 393467.
[6] Sharp, Katherine Lucinda, letter to Lucy P. Williams, 25 February 1907, University of Illinois Alumni Personnel Records, University Archives, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
[7] Hazeltine, Mary Emogene, "Methods of Training in One Library School," The Library Journal 34 (6) (June 1909): 256.
[8] Bolton, Charles Knowles, "The Librarian's Duty as a Citizen," The Library Journal 21 (5) (May 1896): 219.

librarian can enter into the improvement of the social and intellectual life of the community without gaining strength himself."[9]

Over time, many library educators withdrew from the service model.[10] They began to shy away from practical experience, claiming that it only provided training for today. While writers in the field initially compared the profession with theology and other service professions, this became less frequent as librarianship was more widely compared to fields of entrepreneurial pursuits. Library school curricula began to follow the business model in an effort to escape the stigma that confused service with servility. Instead, they emphasized theory-based education on the grounds that it would sustain graduates over the course of their professional careers. The following statement by Raber and Connaway is an example of the denigration of service in the discipline: "The need to be of meaningful service to the profession, however, aggravates the problems library and information science education has with regard to establishing a credible position within university culture."[11] More recently, Dillon and Norris issued this warning to faculty: "To engage solely in localized problem solving that satisfies the immediate practical issues facing librarians today would be to reduce scholars to consultants, and threaten the status of the schools in the eyes of the academy."[12]

As a result, LIS programs today find themselves on the fringes of the service-learning movement, although there is evidence that this is changing. The field is ready and conducive to educational reform and a few exemplary service-learning educational experiences are beginning to be noticed.[13] An ex-editor of Library Journal noted that "Library experience is as important in getting hired by a library as the MLS, maybe even more so."[14] John N. Berry even called on requiring a practicum as a condition of accreditation for MLS degree programs.

Recent publications have described student experiences in service learning in several LIS programs. Students in the Special Library Association student chapter at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill received a grant to build and organize a library at a homeless shelter for women and their children.[15] Students at the Department of Library and Information Studies at the

---

[9]Ibid.

[10]McCook, Kathleen de la Pena, "Reconnecting Library Education and the Mission of Community," Library Journal 125 (90) (September 1, 2000): 164-65.

[11]Raber, Douglas and Lynn Sillipigni Connaway, "Two Cultures, One Faculty: Contradictions of Library and Information Science Education," Journal of Education for Library and Information Science 37 (2) (Spring 1996): 123.

[12]Dillon, Andrew and April Norris, "Crying Wolf: An Examination and Reconsideration of the Perception of Crisis in LIS Education," Journal of Education for Library and Information Science 46 (4) (Fall 2005): 280-298.

[13] McCook, Kathleen de la Pena, A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000).

[14] Berry, John N. III, "The Practice Prerequisite," Library Journal 130 (15) (September 15, 2005): 8.

[15] Pierce, Jennifer Burek, "Library Students Making a Difference," American Libraries 36 (7) (August 2005): 83.

University of Buffalo also worked with a homeless shelter.[16] Students at the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Florida have developed family literacy programs. Practica at the University of Alberta's School of Library and Information Sciences are typically available in eight areas, with most students completing work in reference, collection management, and cataloging and indexing.[17]

A few writers mention the disadvantages of fieldwork experiences. Even John N. Berry cautioned that LIS students can adopt bad practices from fieldwork sites such as ill will toward library patrons. Fieldwork students can be required to do menial, repetitive work or work well beyond the hours for which they are committed. Libraries can use interns to avoid filling professional library positions. Fieldwork coordination takes time and commitment with preapproval of fieldwork sites, supervision of students, incorporation of a reflective element of the experience, and faculty supervision. Students may need to follow unique registration procedures. Faculty may need to follow any university procedures for student travel; students may need to secure medical insurance and submit to background checks. Those involved may need to complete formal training in conducting human subject research, especially if they plan to disseminate the results of their experiences.

To students, library experience can provide socialization, a useful professional connection, and a resume item that provides some documentation of their field-related skills that may be considered an essential competitive edge in the job search. Service learning provides opportunities for LIS students to work directly with issues of diversity: LIS school graduates may be working with patrons with very different life experiences than their own. It may help students conduct a mid-program self-evaluation; by helping them become aware of their shortcomings students can adjust their program of studies to add different or additional coursework. They may find affirmation in their career or study area choice or serve as a red flag and the internal voice that tells them to choose another area of focus. Field sites gain by having a new pair of eyes examine routine operations. Students have sometimes experienced that they serve as good listeners to library staff that otherwise may not be regularly consulted. Oberg and Samek observed that a practicum experience "strengthens students' appreciation of their LIS education and of how it prepares them for professional work."[18] Faculty also gain from the experience as they refresh their curricula. Students have reported that their practical experience helped them gain confidence in their emerging skills. It can ease the transition from being a student to becoming a professional.

Elaine Yontz wrote a well-received article, "How You Can Help Save Library Education," that appeared in the January 2003 issue of American Libraries.[19] She listed

---

[16]Peterson, Lorna, "Using a Homeless Shelter as a Library Education Learning Laboratory: Incorporating Service-Learning in a Graduate-Level Information Sources and Services in the Social Sciences Course," Reference & User Services Quarterly 42 (4) (Summer 2003): 307-310.

[17]Oberg, Dianne and Toni Samek, "Humble Empowerment: The LIS Practicum," PNLA Quarterly 63 (3) (Spring 1999): 20-22.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Yontz, Elaine, "How You Can Help Save Library Education," American Libraries 34 (1) (January 2003): 42.

14 ways that library practitioners can become involved in supporting LIS education from offering to guest lecture in classes to volunteering to serve on accreditation external review panels. Her suggestions were positive and action-centered.

In 2003, Lillard and Wales noted that "Fostering a closer collaboration between library educators and [academic] librarians through a variety of activities can help ensure that library education meets the needs of the profession."[20] All in all, LIS students, faculty, and the profession as a whole stand to benefit from incorporating fieldwork experience into curricula provided that such experiences are well-planned and supervised.[21]

---

[20]Lillard, Linda L. and Barbara A. Wales, "Perspectives on … Strengthening the Profession: Educator and Practitioner Collaboration," The Journal of Academic Librarianship 29 (5) (September 2003): 316-319.
[21]An earlier version of this paper was published in Neely, Teresa Y. and Kuang-Hwei Lee-Smeltzer, eds. Diversity Now: People, Collections, and Services in Academic Libraries (Haworth: New York, 2001).