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Among shelves. Librarianship for librarians: A starting project on LIS training

Edgardo Civallero

Edgardo Civallero (Buenos Aires, 1973) holds a degree in Library and Information Sciences from the National University of Cordoba (Argentina), where he also studied History. He specialized in knowledge classification and documentation languages, libraries and indigenous and minority societies, oral tradition and book history, and he has published a number of academic works on these and other LIS fields. He has also participated in international organizations (IFLA, UDC Consortium) and in different professional projects (open access, scholarly publications, etc.), and he has worked on progressive/critical librarianship, LIS and resistance, library and human rights, and the role of libraries and information in social justice.

Civallero also works as an editor and a graphic designer, and has developed a career as a performer and researcher in the field of music. His research in both music and LIS is combined with an intense divulgation activity.

Weak foundations

One of the main issues LIS has to face on an international level is the lack of proper professional training among librarians, i.e. library staff. This

problem –whose many aspects have been fragmentarily documented in professional literature, and which is usually associated to "developing" countries, although it is not exclusive to such nations– affects a significant percentage of workers in all categories of libraries, but especially in what may be called "base" libraries: the ones in closer contact with their community and its needs and resources, and where significant relationships between people, knowledge and books are first established; the libraries everywhere – the basic, grass-root ones.

For these librarians, opportunities for LIS instruction are frequently neither available nor affordable, and when they get one, the contents they are usually taught are decided, designed and supervised by an external, unconnected reality (more often than not, one with very different priorities); having little or nothing to do with the needs and concerns of the targeted audience, this training often becomes irrelevant and/or inapplicable.

The issue has been timidly identified and addressed in various ways over the last decades (an example is UNESCO's "Libraries for all!" program in the 90's), usually with mixed results. Nowadays, digital networks are literally flooded with educational and informational resources, which are expected to provide limitless training possibilities for everybody; however, far from making things easier, they have made them more complicated by contributing narrow, outdated contents and low-quality, misleading texts. In addition, the goals of mainstream LIS education have drastically shifted over the past years, some of them blatantly contradictory. In short: for reasons that should be carefully studied, the situation has neither received sufficient attention nor an appropriate response.

Dealing with this problem should be a top priority for the LIS international community, because it primarily concerns the basic library network all around the world. Children, elderly people, elementary school students or

workers, just to put a few examples, generally do not use the services of the big, fully-resourced library systems, but the ones provided by their public, school or community libraries in their villages or neighborhoods. If the staff of these units had access to the training materials they require to perform their work, the basic services would be improved.

In need of reinforcements

Generally speaking, LIS education (as many other areas of the Humanities) has gone through a substantial, noteworthy change over the past two decades. Since a number of the library's central processes have been or are being transferred to computers and the virtual space –making them more software and hardware dependent–, LIS education is increasingly being limited to a set of technical and administrative skills, with several key areas of the discipline being put aside (and others privatized and handed over to companies). Librarians are being deprived of the ethical, scientific and humanist elements of their profession; instead, they are given pre-set lists of practical instructions, which "entitle" to them to serve as an interchangeable cog in a larger machine.

Paradoxical as it may seem, technology imposes restrictions on what can or cannot be done in libraries (and by librarians); however, LIS education does not question or challenge its primacy, neither suggests ways to move outside or beyond this paradigm. This reveals a need for empirical and theoretical tools to assist librarians in being more in control and able to evaluate situations and act in a proactive, independent way. For librarians, barriers are growing. And, somehow, their liberty of movement –even their possibility of moving– is diminishing.

When thinking about what kind of LIS education should be given to librarians without a formal training or a proper set of skills, one idea

comes to mind: it is necessary to provide tools and elements for them to build a solid conceptual basis; hence, a strong emphasis should be placed on the –much neglected– fundamentals of the profession. Once the groundwork has been laid, librarians should be able to make plans and solve problems autonomously by applying their knowledge to practical, daily situations, and they will gain confidence in their newly acquired / developed skills little by little.

By putting together all these ideas, the project "Among shelves" was created.

One small step forward

"Among shelves" Project, conceived by Argentinean librarian Edgardo Civallero, is aimed at creating basic LIS handbooks intended for library workers – and anyone else interested in the topic.

The collection is meant to cover a set of basic subjects organized into four main areas: librarianship (design and creation of a library and its collection, basic goals and services), documentation (cataloguing, classification, indexation, thesauri), technology (from basic hardware/software and web design to web 2.0, data mining and digital curation) and miscellaneous (history of the book, critical librarianship, reading support, research and writing techniques). Its pages will bring together theory and practice alongside a necessary dose of critical thought; through them, the most essential LIS concepts, ideas, methods and techniques will be delivered and explained in a simple and yet thorough way.

Each book will be available as a digital download (.pdf), and will be freely distributed under a Creative Commons license (attribution-non

commercial-no derivatives) from an online platform. Several printing options will be provided, including DIY printing and binding. All documents will be subject to revision, correction and updating: feedback from readers will be welcome to improve subsequent editions.

The materials are designed to be translated and adapted to as many languages and cultural contexts as necessary (and possible), especially to indigenous and minority languages. In that sense, the model behind this idea is fully scalable, expandable and replicable.

"Among shelves" includes a parallel research on librarians' current education, skills, work and functions, as well as comprehensive documentation on the development and dissemination of process itself.

The project is meant to stand up for a library model based on knowledge and people, where technology is just another tool; to back up the work of "base" libraries, the ones offering library services to the largest percentage of population throughout the world; to endorse the idea of "sustainable library", closer to degrowth than to irresponsible consumption of finite resources. To sum up, it is a project intended to support librarians who are critical and aware of the reality and want to play an active role in re-shaping it.

The project takes its name from a common everyday situation in most libraries around the world – the libraries where things still happen *among shelves*, and to which the work of this project is devoted to.