



Educating Librarians for Literacy and Building Community

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108 — Libraries for literacy: linking generations, empowering communities — Literacy and Reading

Abstract:

In order for libraries to promote literacy, link generations, and build community librarians need to be educated to the important role they have as leaders in the profession and the role libraries and libraries play in promoting civil society. In so doing, library schools have a responsibility to develop curricula to promote literacy, library literacy, and technology literacy. Building and empowering communities are a library responsibility. That responsibility includes developing programs that focus on different age cohorts as well as spanning those cohorts. Most library schools address literacy issues and the provision of library services to different groups. Fewer offer a curriculum with a focus on community building.

This paper discusses the development of a community building through public libraries curriculum implemented by the Master of Library and Information Science Program at Valdosta State University. The community building project is funded by a grant from the US Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to the Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS) and Valdosta State University. The IMLS grant funds forty-five scholarships for students focusing on community building. The curriculum developed to meet the requirements of the grant is to be incorporated as a part of the Program's wider curriculum.

Introduction

It has been argued that libraries serve many functions in the civil society. They promote literacy, they build communities, they integrate (Elbeshausen & Skov 2004), they democratize (Kranich 2001), they entertain (Davies 2004), they level (Collins 1996), they elevate (Byrne 2003), and they create social capital (Johnson 2010). On the obverse, the destruction of library culture and the suppression of books are seen to contribute to the destruction of civil culture, to literacy, and to freedom of expression (Knuth 2006). The preceding list of characteristics prompts three questions. First, are these attributes inherent to libraries? Second, are these attributes desirable attributes? Third, if these attributes are inherent or desirable, how are they promoted? If one accepts that any or all of these attributes in their various manifestations should be the function of the library, should we then educate librarians to promote them?

Libraries are also said to promote the democratization of civil society (e.g. Kranich, 2001). The promotion of civil society in turn, may be said to promote community development. Indeed, Alexis de Tocqueville, the father of sociology was to suggest in his nineteenth century work *Democracy in America* that intermediating social institutions, like schools, churches, and the press serve to protect democracy from the excesses of the state and of the people. Tocqueville's work predates by twenty years the establishment of the first publicly funded public libraries. It is equally true, however, that libraries exist in and support the status quo in the most authoritarian societies (see e.g. Warren 2001). Indeed libraries existed long before notions of democracy were developed. I digress. It is important to stress that libraries in and of themselves are not necessarily vectors for community building. What is important are the underlying beliefs and practices of the librarians who manage those libraries. Library school curricula can play an important role in the development of those beliefs and practices.

The education of librarians covers a wide range of subjects and skills. Curricula include focuses on different library types, to include public library practice. Literacy and the ethics of literacy have been long incorporated in those curricula. Community building as a role of function of public libraries has been implicit in the curricula but it has only been relatively recently that it has been explicitly included. The Master of Library and Information Science Program (MLISP) (see <http://www.valdosta.edu/mlis/>) at Valdosta State University in Georgia, USA, is a beneficiary of an Institute Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant to the Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS). IMLS is a US government agency that promotes museums and libraries in the United States through, through among other mechanisms; grants to promote library education (see <http://www.ims.gov/>). GPLS is an agency of the Georgia state government that supports public libraries (see <http://www.georgialibraries.org/>). The grant was designed to provide scholarships to fifteen students per admitted over three consecutive semester for a total of forty-five students. The scholarship requires students to follow a public library curriculum that emphasizes the role of public libraries as engines for community building. Explicit in the

curriculum is the proposition that public libraries are agencies for the development of community and for the promotion of literacy.

MLIS Curriculum

No one curriculum fits all. Library education varies from country to country and region to region. Therefore, there is no one prescription for community building or for literacy education. Indeed, concepts of community and literacy levels likewise differ widely.

In Canada and the United States, the terminal professional degree for library professionals is the master's degree. That degree is called a variety of things; Master of Library Science, of Information Science, of Science, and frequently of Library and Information Science. In most of the world, a bachelor's degree, often the bachelor of library and information science is the required professional credential.

Certification or accreditation also differs. In some countries, professional librarians are certified based upon successful completion of an examination or upon membership in a professional association. In others successful completion of a library program and examination by faculty and an external examiner constitutes attainment of professional status. In Canada and the United States, graduation from an accredited master's program is often the credential required for professional employment.

The Valdosta State University Master of Library and Information Science Program is a 39-hour course leading to the MLIS degree. Thirty-nine hours translates into thirteen courses that introduce the student to a range of library types and skills. A student graduating from the Program is expected to exhibit a certain minimum level of competence, to include the ability to:

- Perform administrative, service, and technical functions of professional practice in libraries and information centers by demonstrating skills in Information Resources; Reference and User Services; Administration and Management; and Organization of Recorded Knowledge and information
- Use existing and emerging technologies to meet needs in libraries and information centers.
- Integrate relevant research to enhance their work in libraries and information centers.
- Demonstrate professionalism as librarians or information specialists.

These are the general and minimum competencies. Students may develop a wide range of skills through a variety of elective courses, including a concentration on public libraries (for a course list, see <http://www.valdosta.edu/mlis/courses.shtml>). Literacy issues are introduced into the curriculum in a number of courses. These include the required introductory course, Foundations,

and the exit course, Capstone. These issues are raised in several elective courses to include Libraries and Literacy in History and Information and Ethics.

To promote the objectives of the IMLS grant, the MLIS Program developed two new courses. The first of these two courses, Community Building focuses explicitly on the role and function of public librarians and public libraries in the civil society and as participants in the larger community.

The second of the two courses is a seminar. The seminar is structured to promote student discussion of public library issues, to include literacy in its several aspects. Students enrolled in the seminar are in the latter part of their LIS education process.

These courses and the training of public librarians for community building are developed to sensitize library students to the skills and responsibilities inherent in their practices. These include ethical considerations like access and patron privacy rights. It includes civil society concepts of participation and the role of social institutions in the promotion of social participation. The VSU MLIS Program seeks to inculcate the concept that libraries serve to intermediate between patrons and information but also between different people and citizens and civil institutions. Part of that function is to help educate the individual about social institutions. On a more mundane level, libraries provide access points for individuals seeking the services of public and private institutions. In the United States, many companies now require job applicants to submit electronic forms. Libraries may provide the only computer resource many may have. Similarly many local, regional, and national governments require a variety of electronic filings. Public libraries again provide those online services.

At the same time, libraries can intermediate between individuals and institutions. Libraries can also offer services to integrate individuals into the larger culture. Many US libraries, for example, offer basic civics education as well as language training. The myth and history of the American public library include histories of people who were self-educated within the walls of those libraries and of people who were socialized into the larger culture. Those same libraries also serve to adopt and incorporate new cultures and knowledge into the larger social sphere.

Public libraries can also serve to provide services to different cohorts within a society. Libraries focus services developed for children, youth, young adults, adults, and older adults. Services have long been in place for people with disabilities. There is a wide literature addressing, for example, services to the blind and people with other concerns (see e.g. Green and Blair 2011)

Finally, public libraries often participate as public institutions of last resort. Libraries provide support for people in distress and in time of emergencies. For example, in the United States libraries are important focal points in the aftermath of hurricanes and flooding.

The Literacy-Community Building Intersection

Literacy is a complex socio-culture concept, one which has cultural and linguistic elements (Purcell-Gates). Literacy within the context of public libraries has multiple dimensions. Definitions of literacy in the context of public libraries differ and include ethical mandates to promote literacy, to improve the literacy skills of individuals and of communities, to enhance library literacy defined as improving information retrieval skills, and technological literacy. Technological literacy is most frequently defined as the ability to efficiently utilize traditional and emerging technologies ranging from computer competencies through the most recent social networking tools. Technological literacy is a “moving target.” One hundred years ago the typewriter and the telephone were cutting edge technologies and matters of concern for some librarians.

Community building is an equally complex subject. Kathleen de la Peña McCook (2000) has recognized the importance of community building as well as the responsibility of library schools to incorporate community building within their curricula. McCook and Peggy Barber (2002) have further elaborated that responsibility for community building with a focus on life-long learning for adults in the public library context. They stress the importance of library school curricula to promote adult literacy.

Community building, literacy, and libraries are generating new attention and new interest (see Pigg, 2001 and Hillenbrand, 2005). Social media to include Library 2.0 concepts are seen as means to create both virtual and physical community. Others have pointed to the need to bridge the digital divide as an exercise in libraries building communities (e.g. Rogers, 2011). The American Library Association, for example, has refocused recent attention on libraries and community building.

Conclusions

Librarians are part of the community and as community members have an inherent right to participate in the community as do other members. At the same time Libraries are also important local institutions and have actual and potential competence to promote and influence community.

The twenty-first century has brought new and interesting challenges. New technology creates new opportunities but also new challenges for librarians to promote community and literacy. Library and Web 2.0 technologies are seen as not only promoting the continued relevance of libraries but also as means for libraries to promote community (e.g. Miller 2005). Our understandings of the concepts of library, of community, and of literacy are, however, undergoing redefinition. It becomes incumbent therefore on the library school to incorporate these ideas into the curriculum.

It is equally important to continually review library school curricula to both reflect changes but also to help guide those changes. By addressing libraries building community, we help fulfill our civic responsibility to the community and to the profession.

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