Continuity and Change, or, Will I Ever be Prepared for What Comes Next?

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During the last year I've been asked a lot about the future of libraries, the future of reference specifically, and for advice about getting an MLS. This is not the first time I've been asked these things and I suspect that you are asked some variant of these questions as well. I tend to think about these questions a lot, which is probably what landed me in this RUSA President gig in the first place. The questions about the future of library services and obtaining the MLS degree are intertwined, even when they are not being asked explicitly by the same person.

Perhaps because I spend a lot of time thinking about this, or perhaps because I have a deadline on this column, I came up with three ways to deconstruct these questions. By looking at the questions from multiple angles, we can move from uncertainty and trepidation into influence and agency. My approach is to consider both questions as ones of *existence*, *change*, or *action* and to address them as related within those categories.

- Existence: will there continue to be libraries and will I be able to get a job?
- Change: what will libraries be and will I be able to get the job for which I went to school?
- Action: how will we shape libraries and how can I be prepared for my career?

EXISTENCE: WILL THERE CONTINUE TO BE LIBRARIES AND WILL I BE ABLE TO GET A JOB?

The curt response is almost certainly and maybe, respectively.

This position is most often represented by patrons who either don't use the library or who see everything as digital and don't realize that the library still acquires and organizes information that patrons believe to be free. A case in point is the young journalism student who interviewed me about "everything being digital now" and "if librarians were still needed" and my thoughts on that. Of course we as librarians know that everything is not digital now, everything is not likely to be digital anytime soon, and that there is a digital divide that we need to be aware of globally and locally. Digital does not equal free. Digital still requires intermediation for organizing and finding, etc. Librarian Dana Skwirut says it well: "Librarians' law of the Internet: any article that says a library/being a librarian is obsolete is proof in itself that the profession is still needed to help people research and find accurate information"[1]

As librarians we might tire of what feels like defending libraries and librarianship. Certainly, we are on the defensive when libraries are being closed, K–12 schools layoff librarians en masse, and budgets are cut. At the same time, libraries have enormous goodwill among people as evidenced by recent Pew reports and successful bond issues as well as positive media coverage and the patrons streaming into our buildings.

While librarians know the value of libraries to our communities and the range of what we do regarding digital and print information, librarians are at the same time asking the existence questions. It is difficult not to ask them because we hear them repeatedly. We need to remain aware of the threat not from change but from ignorance and indifference to our mission. Libraries are enduring institutions built on fundamental values of education, equitable access to information, and the organization and preservation of the historical record for the future. As a trifecta, no institution is doing these better. Those are values that are widely held by many libraries, and if we focus on how libraries are enduring institutions that support these values—no matter the other changes—I think we have a very good chance at continued existence and relevance.

Sometimes the question of relevance is specific to the need for reference service. It is difficult in these instances not to feel like I am talking from a place of self-interest because (1) I love reference work and (2) I represent RUSA. I also must acknowledge that being at a very large research library makes my situation and experiences different. Your mileage may vary. However, if we approach reference in terms of its fundamentals, it shouldn't disappear, only evolve. Dave Tyckson does a great job of addressing the question "Is reference dying?" in his IAmRUSA interview at http://connect.ala.org/comment/58272. He posits three scenarios where reference could die:

- Scenario 1. Information becomes so easy to find and evaluate that no one will ever need help finding anything again.
- Scenario 2. Information becomes privatized and only paying customers will have access to it.
- Scenario 3. Libraries become irrelevant to their community and stop being used as information centers.

His analysis of these scenarios dovetails with my analysis on the existence of libraries but is more succinct and entertaining. In the end, it seems unlikely that reference will disappear as a service unless we will it so.

The question about getting a job is more complex. I believe libraries will continue to exist and have the fundamental roles that they have had for at least two hundred years, so I believe that there will be jobs in libraries. How many and of what type is a different question. Whether a specific person is able to get a job depends on many personal variants, including what you want to do in libraries and how flexible you are, where you want to live, and your personality, among other factors. It is a longstanding trope that saying you like to read books is the wrong response on an application for library school. But other perceptions and goals can miss the mark as well. An application to be a reference librarian that says you want to answer questions all day misses the scope of what libraries are about and what librarians do. What is continuous in libraries are the big goals; the specific tasks are subject to change, and your ability to prepare for that and be adaptable is key to your career prospects.

CHANGE: WHAT WILL LIBRARIES BE AND WILL I BE ABLE TO GET THE JOB FOR WHICH I WENT TO SCHOOL?

We may also feel up to our ears in discussions of changes and the future. But much like the questions about existence, we can't ignore them. This is a more productive approach than worrying about existence. If we think about change correctly, staying aligned with what is fundamental and continuous, then we develop our libraries in ways that reinforce our value. If we accept that what we do will change but who we are will not, I believe it keeps us grounded and sane as individuals and organizations. It also puts into perspective training for the profession.

This is not to say that changes cannot be inspiring, quirky, innovative, (insert your own adjective here). Changes should, however, grow out of those core things that people value about libraries and not overtake the fundamental. Loaning cake pans is a great idea for a community that will use it and promotes free access and self-development. But a library that only lends cake pans would not meet the definition of a library in the way that would be sustained through taxes or tuition and would be unlikely to continue for centuries. Libraries risk a lot when they define themselves around changes as an attempt to stay relevant. 3D printers, game collections, virtual reference, and e-books are not what define the library. These are all services, areas of action, that support the broader goals.

So what changes are in store? At the risk of copping out, I'll say that I don't know. The attempt to predict the future, aside from being impossible, is contrary to the idea of change because prediction can narrow people's thinking. When I started working in libraries twenty years ago, I could not know what information would look like today. This is where change becomes both scary and exciting. We are excited when we see the changes as improvements or because we enjoy learning and doing new things. We see the changes as scary when we feel unprepared or we think that the change threatens our existence. Since I've already addressed the question of existence, I will focus on preparedness.

The second part of the change question is "will I be able to get the job for which I went to school?" Answering a question with a question: did you go to school to learn a career or to credential for a specific job? If you have approached the MLS as educational rather than vocational, I think that you will be well positioned to get a job. I hear complaints from some students that the MLS has "too much theory." I worry

about that because while some theories might be more relevant than others, I am concerned by students' inability to think critically and connect theory with the practical. I do not believe there is too much theory, but there might be a theory–practice gap. Life in libraries is not a series of checklists—there are professional decisions to make, and theories are frameworks for thinking about questions. We can create guidelines, best practices, and rules, but using them smartly requires an understanding of more than the steps. Creating those guidelines, applying them, and keeping them current as environments change requires the ability to bridge theory and practice. These are what I believe distinguish education from training. I lead a lot of training in my current job, so I am not denigrating the importance of training, but it is a distinction that helps answer the question "will I be able to get the job I went to school for?"

I first learned to conduct reference before starting my MLS degree. It was a wonderful training experience, structured more as an apprenticeship where over two months I progressed from observation to answering questions solo. I learned how to find out what the patron needed through asking the right questions and what sources would contain the answers. The training and principles were very specific to the tax and accounting library where I worked, and while I learned some transferrable skills, I did not have the broader framework that I gained from my MLS education. Without the education, I would not have had the perspective to help draft the first *RUSA Guidelines for Maintaining and Implementing Virtual Reference Services* or to lead my library through launching its own chat reference service. I was certain that I wanted to be a reference librarian, but I took the advice not to just take reference courses. This was excellent advice in several ways. My current job, as a manager of a reference service, has me providing reference only five hours a week. Classes on personnel and information-literacy instruction prepared me for supervision and training. Courses in cataloging and indexing prepared me for leading the public interface team for our library catalog and for consulting with faculty about book indexing. None of these was an area in which I predicted I would be working fifteen years ago. My apprenticeship-model training, wonderful as it was, prepared me for the job I had. The MLS prepared me for the unpredictable futures both of libraries and of my career.

My best answer to questions about the MLS as career preparation is that the MLS is an education. Approaching the MLS as a means to a specific job or career goal is vocational and risks putting blinders on your education and future career. This is not to advocate being unfocused or scattered; a well-rounded approach to goals and course selection will prepare you better for not only a changing library job market but for a flexible and interesting career.

ACTION: HOW WILL WE SHAPE LIBRARIES AND HOW CAN I BE PREPARED FOR MY CAREER?

Once we accept that change is something that will happen and we cannot predict the future, we could opt to feel helpless—rocks tossed around by the current. It is important to remember that we are not rocks, that we are people with agency; as individuals and groups we can take action and move ourselves with, against, or out of the current. We can even build rafts and boats. If you have taken the MLS route, you should have the knowledge and skills to develop your library and your career and to influence the profession.

What actions can we take and how will we shape libraries? Specific situations will vary by library. I am a big advocate of professional guidelines and best practice, but also of local decisions. Just as the foundations of the profession and the core values of librarianship give us grounding from which to develop new services, guidance from organizations like RUSA give us a starting point for our local adaptations. Being a large research library that is decentralized in management, my library probably looks quite unlike yours if you focus on the details. Yet we probably share many of the same principles and professional practices. The ways we are divergent are interesting and make us unique and sometimes underpin the relevance to our local populations. This is again a way to say that I cannot know what new thing you might do next in your library or how to address a budget crisis or an indifferent library board or whatever challenges are in your future.

Where the question of action productively takes us is to being prepared. To having at our ready the information about our communities' needs and patterns of using and not using the library. To being aware of national trends and local variance. To being able to articulate the value of libraries *right now* and as part of a long tradition of widely held societal values that have a future. We need to take the actions of knowing our story and telling our story, not just when we are in a defensive position but because we have a story that is important and even interesting. We need to find and nurture our advocates and let them tell our story. Take the action of trying the new, but don't lose sight of the purpose. Know that your actions and attitude shape the future. Take the actions that grow your library and your staff.

If we accept that we cannot know the future and that *the library is a growing organism*,[2] then we are left with the question of how to be and stay prepared. I have already talked about the MLS developing your ability to think about libraries, to see the broad missions and the societal implications, and to enable you to have a career that takes unexpected paths (if you are open to them). The MLS is also not the end of learning as there are always new things to learn, and in a broad field, it isn't possible to learn everything that would be useful. This is made clear through the innumerable "what I didn't learn in library school" articles and blog posts as well as the range and number of webinars, online short-courses, post-degree certifications, conference workshops, etc., offered

by RUSA and other divisions of ALA as well as state library associations, LIS publishers, and others.

Some professions, such as medicine and law, require continuing education (CE) out of awareness that it is important to stay current. The best way to ensure it happens is to regulate it (in some states and localities CE is a requirement for librarians, but it is not a national, uniform requirement). Continuing education, whether required or not, doesn't just keep you aware of what is new in the profession, it allows you to learn things that are *new to you*. It is not possible for any program, degree, or credential to fully prepare you for everything you might encounter in your career. In my estimation, if it has, then your career is not very interesting. Much like technological and societal changes, we cannot necessarily predict the path our careers will take. This is why RUSA's courses, such as MBA in a day and Interlibrary Loan 101, are not new topics but are continuously popular.

These trainings are not a substitute for the MLS but are a supplement for learning new areas or staying current. They are also great opportunities for people working in libraries who may not want to invest in the MLS right now (or maybe ever) but want to expand into new areas of knowledge and work. Continuing education is an action that helps us to shape services in our libraries and our own career futures.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science* continues to provide wise guidance more than eighty years later. Wayne Biven-Tatum argues in *Libraries and the Enlightenment* that the foundations of both public and academic libraries in the United States are grounded in the intellectual movement of the eighteenth century.[3] As someone committed to libraries, the enduring principles that are the foundation of the library reassure me that libraries have a future, no matter the changes around us. Weathering change does not mean being static, and to avoid the position of fear and uncertainty, we need to embrace the approach of action in creating our futures. Next time the question is about the existence of libraries and our job, think about continuity and change and reframe the question to one about how actions can grow libraries and careers that are both well rooted and flourishing.

References

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