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Workplace Practice

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Biography

Judith Field has been Course Developer and Tutor for Library Assistant Training at ACE North Coast Community College, Lismore, New South Wales, for the last four years. She worked as a Library Assistant with Westminster City Libraries, before qualifying in London. Qualified posts include Music Librarian at Cambridge City Library and then at the State Library of Western Australia. Her Australian experience includes working in academic, school, public and special libraries in Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. Judith has been an executive committee member of *Friends of Libraries Australia* (FOLA) for the last 5 years, with particular responsibility for publicity, and has given papers at their biennial Conferences.

Recognising the assistants: Workplace competency training in Australia

Abstract

Library assistants are front line personnel - but often not given enough big picture information to do the best possible job of representing their institution. Certified training and the recognition of library assistants' skills not only makes them feel appreciated as an integral and important part of the whole organization, but also encourages staff to become interested enough in the library field to consider moving up the qualification ladder. This paper discusses the importance of library assistants and the reasons for considering the structured and ongoing training of this level of staff as imperative for a successful library service in all libraries. It will briefly examine the basic concepts of Competency Based Training and its introduction to the library industry. This will lead to an overview of the different ways that Competency Standards are being used for training in Australia at present – using examples from NSW, Queensland, Victoria and ACT. The final discussion (centering around the Conference theme of 'meeting the challenges today') will cover the increasing recognition, especially in USA, of Support Staff and how this might progress in Australia with the support of ALIA and professional librarians.

Introduction

Five years ago I took on the task of developing a Certificate III Library course for a Community College in rural New South Wales. I was asked to do so because I had wide library experience in the UK and Australia, having worked in all types of library (except national), together with some training experience (in schools and universities). As a result of teaching and assessing at this preliminary level, I have become increasingly passionate about acknowledging the importance of library assistants and their skills.

Before proceeding any further I must open a proverbial 'can of worms' and discuss terminology. There are so many terms used to describe those who work in libraries, but do not have a professional library qualification and it seems that attempts to settle on a universally accepted term have not been successful.

The ALA website (American Library Association, n.d) encapsulates the problem exactly 'What to call support staff is as perplexing a problem as pinning down a job description'. Even a general term like 'support staff' can cause confusion.

IFLA's Guidelines for Public Libraries (IFLA, 2000) refers to Library assistants but uses Support Staff for caretakers, cleaners, drivers, and security staff. Encarta Encyclopaedia (Encarta, n.d.) uses 'non professional support staff' to describe both technicians and library assistants, while a CILIP President (Corrall, 2002) admits that people insufficiently acknowledged '[are those] we variously describe as

'paraprofessionals', 'support staff', 'non professional' or even 'unqualified staff'. There is even more confusion because the definition of terms is not consistent internationally. 'Paraprofessional library staff in UK are generally known as library assistants....[and it appears that] they do not enjoy the status and benefits of library technicians in Australia.' (Blyth, K. 2002)

I use Library Assistant in this paper for general library staff who have no accredited library qualification, saving Paraprofessional for those who have Technician level training. However I occasionally use the over-riding generic title Support Staff to encompass all staff other than recognized academic 'professionals' ALA Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels (2003) estimates a ratio of at least 2 support staff for every librarian, some of whom will be trained as technicians, or office staff. However that still leaves many library assistants who have some kind of contact with library clientele. These are the people with whom this session is concerned.

Library Assistants are important people too

In 1948 McDiarmid (1948,p.232) considered that the "almost complete neglect" of training non professional workers was "dangerous to the future of librarianship" It has taken almost half a century for the benefits of formal training for this section of library workers to be globally acknowledged.

At a recent Presentation night one of my students chose to talk on 'The value of Library Assistants'. I would like to share some of her remarks with you.

'The library assistant is a cog on the wheel that makes a library

run smoothly. Although in terms of status we may be at the bottom of the ladder, remember a car does not run very well without first gear ... For a library to run smoothly a functional team is required. The library assistant is an integral and necessary part of that team, indeed in many cases forming the spine of the library' (Kellner, 2004).

That last metaphor reflects that Kerrie is a qualified nurse anxious to make a career change. Smith (1990) tells us that 'The customers' perception of an organisation's quality is held in the hands of its people'. A team is only as strong as its weakest link and if that is the 'meet and greet' person on the front counter the image of the whole service can be affected.

It is most important for *every* member of staff to understand all aspects of their library service - procedures, policies and personnel – and become familiar with the community or clientele they serve. With this institutional knowledge Front Line staff, whether librarian or assistant, are able to give assistance themselves or pass the enquirer to an appropriate colleague.

This means 'whole picture' training for *all staff*, full and part time, casual and permanent, even Saturday morning helpers should all have the same initial training. Many Library Managers, including those at Gold Coast in Queensland, Altona in Victoria and Salisbury in South Australia, have already introduced such 'library overview' training programmes.

Why do library assistants need certification?

In-house training for library assistants has been conducted informally for as long as libraries have existed, (presumably the Hyperetae, who were library assistants at the ancient Library of Alexandria in charge of registration and classification of the books, had some form of training). However in modern times it is only recently that more formal certification has been introduced in UK and Australia and in some states in the United States. Library assistant certification acknowledges practical experience or training while ensuring that this is backed up by evidence of underpinning knowledge.

The advantages of formal certification include:

- the recognition of skills at every level of staffing are recognised
- a nationally recognized certificate which is transferable, enabling training to start at one job and continue in another system on the other side of the continent.
- current skills can be recognized by a new employer and areas for further training are also immediately identifiable
- the training increases personal self esteem and confidence, and allows library assistants to understand that they are a small but important member of the 'library team'

I can give a personal example of that final advantage. One of my students was already working as a casual assistant at a three-person branch of a small regional Library Service and used that for her assessable work

experience. Her Branch Librarian was impressed with the difference the Certificate training made. She perceived greater confidence and more enthusiasm and interest in her employee. The student herself explained how she understood and enjoyed her job more, now she could place herself and her activities in the overall service structure and in the wider 'library world'. She understood better not just *what* she was doing but *why*.

Library assistant training

Education, training and CPD in the Australian Library and Information Science (LIS) world has seen many changes in recent decades.

In the 1970's a Library Technician Certification was introduced to assist training for the increasing amount of mechanical and computer technology being used in libraries. There are now more technicians than librarians in Australia and many of these highly skilled library workers are employed in increasingly responsible positions. There is controversy in some sectors regarding the delineation between technicians and librarians and others have written at length on the subject. The plain fact is that technicians are here to stay and deserve appropriate recognition. The next major training development has been the introduction of Library Assistant Certification, enabling their contribution to be recognised also.

Competency Standards and the Library Industry Training Package

In the 1980's and 1990's national governments in UK, Australia and NZ introduced and developed competency based training as the preferred nationally recognised method of

Vocational Education and Training (VET).

Hazell's (2002) doctorate thesis comprehensively documents international competency movements and training reform agenda as well as the development of industry standards in Australia. This National Training Scheme eventually involved the Australian library industry and has required it to look seriously at a lower level of training. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) was actively involved in the development of the original Library Industry Training Package in the early 1990's and in the revised syllabus introduced in 2004.

Australia was already leading the world in paraprofessional education with its Library Technician qualifications, recognised throughout Australia, and with courses accredited by ALIA, although state based with their own course curriculum.

'Very few countries have developed library competencies and the education and recognition of library technicians as far as has Australia, largely due to ALIA' (Bundy, 2004).

However, industry based competency training is a relatively new concept for the Australian library industry. Competency standards provide formal certification which with an emphasis on skills experience or training, while ensuring that these are backed up by evidence of 'underpinning knowledge'. By implication they are most appropriate for on-the-job training, being practice based. They are issued in a formal structure, assessed according to strict guidelines and recognized nation wide.

Competency standards in Australia are set out according to a formula used for all industry standards recognized by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). Each unit sets out details of the *Elements and Performance Criteria* required for that particular competency. A detailed *range of variables* describes varying contexts, conditions and environments appropriate for these performance criteria.

The *evidence guide* section includes critical aspects of the evidence required, listing the underpinning knowledge and skills that must be assessed. Finally the seven (7) broad key competencies that are considered common to all industries are linked to that particular unit. Standards are presented in incremental levels from Certificate II, III and IV (Library Assistant level), through Diploma (replacing the old Technician qualification) to Advanced Diploma.

Competency Standards are used in Australian libraries for a number of different purposes including job descriptions, staff performance assessments and identifying training needs. This paper discusses their use for training, either in-house or through external providers.

Competency Based Training in Australia

My course was based on the requirements of the Australian Library Industry 'National Training Package' first endorsed a decade ago. This training system has an emphasis on workplace training and assessment, but also has a component that allows for recognition of prior learning or experience. It can be taught in the workplace, by course work,

or using a combination of these methods. Flexibility, portability and various methods of delivery which can be adapted to suit local needs are all important elements in this new way of training.

There are a number of different methods being used to deliver Certificates II – IV in Australia at present.

On the job training

Richmond Tweed Regional Library runs a Trainee programme which employs school leavers for a 2-year contract. During that time they are assessed for Certificate III Units by an independent contracted Assessor, who uses evidence collected from work supervisors, work diaries and written assignments. One of the first trainees is now a permanent member of staff and four more are at various stages of training. Wagga Wagga Library's approach was to train internally with Units being taught and assessed by their own librarians who completed the approved Training and Assessors Certificate Course.

Commercial providers

Docmatrix is a commercial provider conducting training sessions for library assistants who are already working in educational, special and public libraries in Canberra and Sydney. They use a combination of classes and individual workplace assessment, which enables the training to reflect the needs of any particular institution. Capra Ryan operates a distance education course from their base near Brisbane, Queensland using on line teaching and local contracted assessors. This allows isolated workers to upgrade their skills

even though they are disadvantaged by location. This course is on-line, but facilitates interaction with tutors and fellow students – an important ingredient for those not studying face-to-face.

Educational Institutions

TAFE Colleges in a number of Australian states offer full or part time courses for Certificate III – IV level candidates, integrating with the Diploma (Library Technician) course if desired. Some also offer external study as a nationwide option – Box Hill in Melbourne and NT's Charles Darwin University are examples.

My own classes, run by the local Adult Community College, have students who are working as casuals in local libraries, others with previous library experience and some with none. I teach mainly in 'face to face' sessions, which are backed up by assignments, projects and library visits. All students also have to do concurrent practical work on a weekly basis and their detailed Work Diaries count as a major part of their final assessments.

Library Assistants – where to from here?

Why am I championing library assistant training today? Is it because libraries operate differently in the current technological age, or have Library Assistants always been important, just not fully recognised? I think both reasons are true.

We should appreciate the strengths of all levels of staff and provide pathways or 'career ladders' for those who want to continue with their formal training. However staff who choose to, or have

to, stay at the assistant level should be deemed to have earned appropriate respect, and a national certificate that recognizes their skills helps to do just that.

It is vitally important in every library that the whole team has the same attitude, and support staff must be backed up and valued by those at more senior level. This does not always happen and the "I'm just a library assistant" syndrome is well documented in library literature. Heynes (1994) surveys the situation in the UK and my IFLA paper (Field, 2005) literature search found a number of sources that discussed attitudes to library assistants, indicating that quite often professionals and paraprofessionals don't yet consider valuable the work done by support staff.

In an article entitled 'The plight of library assistants' Woodsworth (1998) hopes that 'with flattening organizations, technology and team-oriented management as levellers ... hierarchical [systems] would crumble and with them would go the caste systems and attitudes'. However that has not always happened.

The phenomenon of blurring roles for professionals, technicians and assistants is increasing. The demarcation lines have always been wavy in smaller libraries or library service points where the Library Assistant may be the only member of staff available. My daughter, a part time library assistant while studying at University regularly worked alone at a small but busy suburban branch library on Saturday mornings. Conversely, many of my positions have been in one or two person, special or academic

libraries where as a qualified librarian I had to do shelving, circulation and inter library loans, as well as acquisitions, budgeting, training and in-depth reference queries for academics, vets and architects.

Here is the ALA website (American Library Association, n.d) trying to find a comprehensive description of support staff responsibilities:

'The range and complexities of [library assistants] duties vary with each position, the size and type of library in which they work, and each libraries specific needs, goals or mission'

Technology has played a big part in moving responsibility down the line (an example here is copy cataloguing). Senior staff are required to concentrate on management and technology issues nowadays (very different from the situation when I entered the industry in the early 1960's) and the first contact person is more likely to be a Library Assistant/Technician than a Librarian.

Library Assistants in an Ageing Profession

Another much discussed topic at the moment is the future problems which will result from our aging profession. In the next ten years there will be a large number of librarians retiring many of whom would have started life as library assistants themselves, but I surmise that the majority of mid career librarians will have entered the profession from graduate level and will not have had a variety of experience of their predecessors. At the same time the curriculum of the undergraduate courses have less and less emphasis on traditional 'librarianship', while

concentrating more on management and information science skills.

I suggest that we need to encourage enthusiastic Library Assistants to consider further advancement to Diploma or University courses, as we need some librarians who started at the bottom and have that 'factory floor' practical experience which will be needed to replace that of those retired librarians. They will bring a different perspective to the profession to those who have entered at graduate level – both have equally valid and important expertise and should complement each other and more importantly learn from each other:

'New library graduates in Australia are a diverse group, some are entering their second career bringing skills and experience in other sectors while others have come direct from secondary education into library courses before job seeking. The new graduate population also includes many library technicians who are upgrading their qualifications – offering a mixture of experience and updated skills that is quite appealing to employers' (Joseph, 2004).

I quote from a presentation to NSW Country Librarians on the importance of attracting and keeping librarians in country services, and on the importance of mentoring at all levels, given by Mylee Joseph. She herself is a prime example of a ladder climber, having started in libraries with a stint of work experience in Year 10 and is now in a senior position in the State Library of NSW. She maintains that without encouragement and support from senior

staff along the way she may well have taken off in another career.

Another such example is my own daughter who began as a casual shelvee to earn pocket money while at high school and worked as a casual in Melbourne libraries to pay bills while studying Psychology at university. After graduating she worked full time as a library assistant while deciding her next career move and her skills with computer software and hardware were recognised by the librarian. Together with her psychology and library experience this led to a variety of positions, from computer help desk, computer skills training, focus groups and general PA duties to being included in the team evaluating new computer systems for the library service. If she hadn't been lured to work in London by friends and by chance moved more into the IT field, she may well have considered doing a post grad library course – and may still do so in the future. The important factor in this story is again the mentoring and opportunities given by a perceptive library manager who used all her staff in positions which recognised their particular skills. Without this Katherine would have moved into another field much sooner.

My final example describes the way a library assistant can gradually expand horizons and if motivated keep setting further goals. Cathryn Harris worked as a library assistant for 13 years before realising that the only way to move on was to improve her skills. Using self motivation she gained her Certificate III with a mixture of internal and external units combined with some RPL assessments. She then began an external Diploma course with Boxhill

TAFE in Victoria, before completing it with Charles Darwin University. She commenced studying with Charles Sturt University (whose support she cannot praise highly enough) in 2002, has completed her degree course and become so addicted to academic study that she has just applied to enrol in the Masters course. Nine years after starting this 'voyage of discovery', where study had to be juggled with a full time job and bringing up a young family, Cathryn is now Library Manager at Mount Gambier - a wonderful example of fulfilling one's potential.

Many Library Assistants have qualifications and experience in areas other than librarianship or have other formal industry VET certificates. My students had worked in call centres, retail, hospitality and nursing, with practical experience in customer service, IT, team leading, publicity etc; all of which could be utilised to great advantage in the library industry.

ALIA as a champion of library assistants

The question is how best to nurture and develop such potential and I respectfully suggest that our Professional Association should become more active in facilitating this by

- promoting to practicing librarians (who maybe bemused by competency jargon, too busy or strapped for cash) the benefits of introducing competency based training.
- encouraging professional members to do mentoring within their departments for particular staff who they believe will go far with the right guidance.

- including more on the website for those seeking information regarding assistant entry to the profession.

These investments would reap rewards and keep the profession alive with new blood and new ideas. I believe that certified training/recognition of library assistants' skills not only makes them feel appreciated as an integral and important part of the whole organization, but also encourages staff to become interested enough in the library field to consider moving up the qualification ladder.

As Hallam (2006) wrote in a recent edition of *Incite* which focused on aspects of Australian library education:

LIS education should be viewed as a collaborative, career-long learning process that involves the individual, universities and training providers, employers and the professional association.

I had already written most of this paper when I discovered in my background reading papers an interesting ALIA Brochure (2005). When it is read with Library Assistants in mind, rather than the professionals for whom it was written, it becomes very pertinent to the topic under discussion.

One of the objects of ALIA is 'to ensure the high standard of personnel engaged in information provision and foster their professional interests and aspirations.' *Skilling members for the future* mentions encouraging members to assume responsibility for their own learning and ensuring that they know about career pathways in the library and information sector.

Two 'highest priority initiatives' in ALIA's current 2 year plan 2005 – 2006 are:

- Promote library and information services as a career
- Achieve membership growth through recruitment and retention programs covering all career stages and sectors

I am extremely encouraged that there is so much in that document that could and should be applied to the area of Library Assistant training. The recognition, creditation, mentoring and encouragement of library assistants should go far to helping ALIA achieve these goals.

My final suggestion is prompted by my experiences introducing Competency Based Training in country NSW and having enthusiastic interest from small local regional libraries and schools who were not able to participate due to small staff numbers, no money to pay for replacements and distances to be travelled.

Although ideally completing a Certificate qualification is desirable, I wonder if ALIA might promote the idea that librarians encourage their staff to do *some* units - maybe the 'big picture' Library Industry unit and any pertaining to their immediate job. This will give Assistants recognition for their current work and that maybe all they want and need. It would not be such a major commitment, so more staff would become involved and may get the taste to continue. As you have seen with the example of Cathryn, very small beginnings can lead to great achievement – it is encouraging people to take that first small step that is so important.

Who are the 'Professionals?'

Finally I want to return to the quagmire of Terminology – this time considering what we mean when we use the term Professional. Instead of continuing to advocate the traditional view that Librarianship is a profession and its only members are Librarians (supported by others), maybe ALIA must look at the situation that exists in the 21st century and consider a postmodern approach. Consider this excerpt from a comprehensive report on library support staff education programs in the United States (Madden & Grover, 2001)

'the traditional and hierarchical system of library employment is in need of officially recognized reconsideration. On the most basic level, the terminology itself is in question, not only because the term professional has come to imply, in an adjectival sense, the competence and élan in the workplace, but because today the work and careers of paraprofessionals are in fact not less than professional in traditional terms.'

I'd like to take that thought further and include all library staff. Many library users consider *all* staff they see as 'Librarians' –not being familiar with library hierarchy. Maybe we should take this fact as our inspiration when we reconsider our profession. The library industry is a Professional service and all library workers have the same aim – to provide the best possible service to clientele – whatever the type of library.

If we consider that we are all professionals (use Dictionary definition here) albeit on different levels, we can discard those dreadful phrases

'paraprofessionals' and 'non professionals'.

Carroll (2004) writes:

'with the advent of training packages and competency-based training it would appear that we now have a continuum of incremental stages leading to a professional qualification...from the initial Certificate II through to Advanced Diplomas with later competencies overlapping with those of the tertiary sector.'

I like her idea of a continuum because there is no barrier to those who want to rise higher, while those who don't are still fully recognised. The concept could also be widened to embrace my desire for a continuum that recognises an inclusive Professional Membership.

Conclusion

To conclude I would like to share with you some words from an eminent librarian from the United States where Library Assistants themselves have organised Support Staff Groups and hold Library Assistant Conferences. Addressing delegates at the 2003 Congress on Professional Education, ALA Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels (2003) said:

'We need to stop ignoring our support staff; instead, we need to train them, we need to recognize them...because it's the right thing for the Association, for our libraries, and for our communities, which deserve the best library service we can provide.'

I agree wholeheartedly. Library Assistants should be acknowledged, trained, given nationally recognised accreditation and, most importantly,

considered part of our splendid
Profession, which I trust will continue to

flourish and be recognised as a leading
player in this information driven century.

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