

The Invisible Librarian

It has been said that much of our work is invisible (Nardi, 1999, p82). Our clients do not realize the amount of effort and expertise required for locating, retrieving, and evaluating the information we provide for them. Of course much of this is due to the traditional service ethos with which we are branded. In a sense we have only ourselves to blame. We are not honest with our users. We say nothing is too much trouble and so they have no idea of what it is we do.

Our concern is that new graduates into the profession are similarly ignorant as to what a librarian *really* does. We are masters and mistresses of continuous and unyielding change, and are constantly adapting. Our roles are in constant flux morphing from one to another and back again. We are in turn; actor, therapist, IT trouble-shooter, student centered educator, copyright expert, detective, promotional marketer, software license expert, negotiator, staff developer, mentor, cataloguer, unionist, financial consultant, research assistant, change manager, and 'shop assistant'.

How can new graduates best prepare for this amorphous world where the roles they play (at times simultaneously) are determined by so many factors over which they have little or no control?

Nardi (1999, p82) states "It is actually part of the professional practice of librarians to protect their clients from the messy details of their work." Our clients needn't know the complex minutiae of the processes we undertake in order to locate verify and evaluate information that helps them with their queries. But it is in our own professional interests and for our own survival that we make them aware of the complex nature of our 'support' role if we are to remain relevant in a Google-powered information world.

One of the most useful things new librarians can come to terms with and one of the more difficult things to manage is knowing when it is appropriate to remain

invisible and when we should be articulate about what we do and the roles we perform. As professionals we fulfil many types of interactions and relationships. In professional practice it is wise to consider the culture in which we work: our supervisors, colleagues, clients/students, and ourselves when we reveal what it is we really do.

This paper offers no solutions. It merely attempts to place our practice within a reflective framework, a suite of reflective lenses through which one might gain an informed perspective of one's practice and some useful tools that can assist this.

Stephen Brookfield's four lenses provide the framework (Brookfield, 1995) Conceptually Brookfield's framework originates from the education sector, in particular adult education. His theories however are wide-ranging and universally applicable to any situation that involves human learning and teaching.

Within this framework we will consider

- our own autobiographical experiences as librarians and library students
- the experiences of new graduates in the information professions
- our colleagues experiences in terms of how our peers and fellow workers help define the culture in the way they see themselves, and other colleagues
- the theoretical literature and how writers and thinkers can provide a critical perspective that helps focus our collective vision in terms of what we are and what we might become and how we can move toward a more fulfilling definition of ourselves
- how life-long learning and communities of practice can function as alternatives to fixed knowledge hierarchies rooted in tradition and impervious to change
- 'survival tips' for new entrants into the library culture

The four lenses

Brookfield asserts that we are unable to see our own practice in a detached way as we are so much a part of it. Human experiences are emotional experiences. Therefore the only way to attain the kind of detachment required for rational analysis is through our autobiographies as learner and teacher; our student's/client's perceptions; our colleague's experiences and the literature, (Brookfield, 1995 p29).

First Lens: Our own autobiographies as learners and practitioners

"We may think we are [practicing] according to a widely accepted curricular or pedagogic model, only to find, on reflection, that the foundations of our practice have been laid in our autobiographies as learners." (Brookfield, 1995, p31). He is saying in essence that nothing that we do today is without context, our values, ethical frameworks and our preferences for different types of 'practice' stem from an historical perspective, our own. We tend to give value to theories, and practices that served us as learners. What I value in professional practice may be different from my colleagues because we have different epistemological frameworks (ways of knowing).

Interestingly Brookfield includes graduate study, professional development and attendance at conferences as three valid autobiographical lenses (Brookfield, 1995, p51).

Reflection:

How has your experience with libraries influenced your perspective of the primary role of a "librarian" and the kind of librarian you want to be?

Tools

Reflective journal/mind map

Second Lens: New Graduates' experiences

" Seeing ourselves through [student's] eyes is one of the most consistently surprising elements....often we are profoundly surprised by the diversity of meanings" Brookfield, 1995, p33).

To find out more about your experiences as library students and new librarians, we posted four questions to the New-Grads-List

1. what appealed to you about becoming a librarian?
2. if you are working as a librarian now, has the job fulfilled your expectations and did your course prepare you for the complexity of the role?
3. if you are not working as a librarian now what are you doing?
4. What do you hope to be doing professionally in five year's time?

We received 14 responses, the broad themes reflected were:

New graduates responded positively to a profession that was seen to be about "helping people"; "books"; "community" "computers" "research" and one that was perceived to be "altruistic".

Others needed a gap-filler after their degree that would get them a job; some liked the diversity of what librarians did and others liked the idea of continuous research and the world of ideas as part of a job description. One person liked the feminised aspects of the profession and that women were not held back from senior positions.

The mix of responses for the other questions demonstrated the diversity of experiences. About 1/3 of the group were not working at professional librarian level, while some of the group were working in 'related' areas (Legal Research and Training Officer (Government), Research Manager (Corporate) It was quite impressive that the remainder worked as public librarians, special librarians, corporate librarians and academic librarians – many of these graduates had gained their positions in a 12 month period after graduation. It was interesting that those who were working in technical roles in libraries before their studies were still in these roles after graduation.

The comments on course satisfaction in terms of preparing graduates adequately for the 'complexity' of their role were interesting. When the

response was negative it was attributed to 'gaps in the knowledge' or a lack of depth, some said their lecturers were 'out of touch' with the profession and limited in 'real experience' and that they learned much more from 'real working librarians' who were guest lecturers. Sadly one respondent said they were learning to lower their expectations, and still another said they enjoyed their job but after all the hue and cry of gaining post graduate qualifications and getting a foot in the much slammed door to gain experience, they pondered on why the wages were so low.

A few respondents thought their library schools had prepared them adequately for what they did now and one respondent was very enthusiastic about the high quality of their course and the institution that offered it, (coincidentally this library is one of the 'movers and shakers' in the Australian academic library world).

In the near future, most respondents wanted to be earning more money, working in management, working overseas, changing positions in the same institution, moving to the private sector where it was perceived there were more opportunities or leaving the profession altogether and pursuing post graduate study in another field.

The respondents who were working as librarians reflected a common 'feeling' that being a librarian was a complex state of affairs, the complexity of which really only revealed itself once they were doing it. For most, it was fulfilling because of the diversity of the role and the opportunities it provided for maintaining contact with the world of people and ideas.

However there was an undercurrent that there could have been more (either opportunities or acknowledgement in the form of higher wages).

Reflection

What do you see as the primary role(s) of library professionals and /or libraries?

Are the users of your services having their needs met?

What does the literature say?

Tools

Information literacy

- Critical Incident Questionnaire

Service provision

- Focus Groups
- Surveys

Third lens: Colleague's Perceptions and Experiences

This paper is timely as recently the ALIA Board of Directors, Regional, National and invited delegates spent two days in Canberra at their annual policy making congress in Canberra. The delegates represented ALIA Special Interest Groups across the country. The energy, commitment and warmth in the room were completely inspiring. The conversations this year were centered on membership and how ALIA might reach potential members (LIS students, new graduates and Technicians) there was much debate about the creation of communities of practice, identity, and belonging. We talked long about the 'what's-in-it-for-me' Generation X/Y librarians and took a good long look at what **was** in it for them as members of their professional association. The ALIA vision for 2010 is articulated in four core areas

- sharing the vision: the connection between the individual and the bigger picture
- promoting innovation: communities of practice, reward and encourage, reflective practice based on research,
- skilling members: lifelong learning, self-responsibility, CPD
- communicating well: inclusivity, transparency and accountability

The keywords of the weekend were "community, relevance, context, diversity and inclusivity". These are the very themes and issues we have been uncovering in our research for this paper.

UNSW

UNSW is in a state of flux; many changes are afoot across every level. Management is attempting to be inclusive. One of the initiatives last year was a change-management group known as FITI (From Implications to Implementation) there were several groups workshopping various aspects of the organisational Working Scenario for 2007. One of the groups looked at 'new roles and skills'. It identified *14 new roles and skills for librarians of the future*. Some of the more unusual ones were; "Dual mode" global context operative (equally comfortable working in both physical and virtual modes), Cross functional project team member, Library-wide promoter of innovation (able to contextualize new ways of working and thinking to users), Repository developer, Risk manager (able to make strategic changes in resource deployment in order to develop the new while seeking less investment in the traditional) Communications manager/ customer focused communicator (making sure people know what they know), Staff development manager, Commercial partner (service development role) and Staff IT enabler. These are the roles our professional colleagues at UNSW have envisioned for the future.

Reflection

How do my colleagues perceive what we 'do' as professionals?

How can we communicate differing perspectives to one another so we can create a coherent and cohesive vision for our library?

What does the literature say?

Tools

Communities of Practice

Peer observation/review

Fourth Lens: The literature

In his seminal work *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995), Brookfield challenges practitioners who shun critical reflection (through theory) in order to center themselves wholly in what they *do*. He says that to make a

distinction between practice and theory is not only nonsense it's epistemologically and practically untenable (Brookfield, 1995).

He goes on to list the benefits of reading the critical theory in that it helps us investigate hunches and instincts that shape our practice. It helps us toward a better understanding of what we already do and how we already think.

In essence the 'literature' (Brookfield, 1995)

- lets us name our practice – helps us with validation of privately held perceptions so they can be seen to be part of a wider community of beliefs. They are practices that are affirmed and recognised as theoretical concepts
- locates our practice in a social (cultural and political) context, so that we can appreciate that there may be many barriers to reflective practice that are external to our influence
- prevents groupthink and becoming stuck in a circle of familiarity
- improves the quality of conversations with our colleagues.

Brookfield has many useful suggestions; he includes chapters on how we can begin to have conversation with our colleagues (especially those who have not yet 'grown ears' to hear what we have to say); he talks about the cultures of silence, secrecy and individualism. One of the difficulties for new graduates is 'breaking into' the professional culture, an extremely well mannered culture where protocol is set somewhere in the past and where some topics (like changing long-standing processes or attitudes) are off-limits. New librarians are unfamiliar where the boundaries lie and it can be an uncomfortable and at times a frustrating voyage of 'discovery'. Finding a voice and commanding enough respect to be heard can be difficult when you're new to a community of long-standing practice.

Brookfield has simple and effective workshop ideas for getting conversations started, solving problems collaboratively and tips on negotiating the 'risks' of being a critically reflective practitioner (someone who asks questions, who wants to improve processes and is committed to life-long learning). Chapter 11

contains inspirational, comforting, and confronting ideas as he deals with; surviving cultural suicide, the impostor syndrome, lost innocence and road-running!

Invisibility

In their 1999 book *Information Ecologies* Nardi and O'Day's ideas are useful because they write about what we as librarians do, irrespective of context, unconstrained by situation, time or culture. They comment on our indispensability and the primary role we play in information ecologies. They highlight our commonalities instead of our differences.

Refreshingly, neither O'Day nor Nardi are librarians. They both have research backgrounds and have spent many years in Silicon Valley. Nardi is an anthropologist. Her ethnographic study at the Apple library was part of a project to develop computer based "intelligent agents" that could do reference and research as well as humans. It was her aim to study how intelligent human agents operate....agents in the form of Reference Librarians. She saw a library as an information ecology.

"...defined simply as a system of people, practices, technologies and values in a particular local environment. In information ecologies the spotlight is not on technology but on human activities that are served by technology" (Nardi 1999 p50).

Despite our diversity in what we do as professionals and what we call ourselves, information environments share primary characteristics.

A library has

- librarians
- clients
- tools
- a specific set of work practices
- techniques
- different technologies - print, paper, electronic
- values

Information ecologies have

- diversity
- locality
- presence of a keystone species

Diversity

Diversity is necessary for the health of the ecology itself, it permits the system to survive continual sometimes chaotic change. In an information ecology there are different kinds of people with different kinds of needs (engineers, lawyers, doctors, anthropologists and different tools to meet these needs (books, journals, web resources, people), everything works *together* in a complementary way.

Locality

Environments have different and specific needs and not one size fits all. We pay undivided attention to the distinctiveness of our particular local ecologies. At UNSW Kensington (Law, Social Science & Humanities, Biomedical and Physical Sciences) as well as at the College Of Fine Arts Library we cater to discipline based information needs. Academic faculties value expertise in their own areas of research.

Keystone species (Librarians)

The keystone is the wedge-shaped stone at the pinnacle of an arch, it stabilises the arch and holds it together. Like the keystone, certain species in an ecosystem are crucial to the shape & stability of the system and the presence of the keystone species is crucial to the survival of the ecology itself. Librarians are the keystone species in the information ecology; we are facilitators, translators, navigators, mediators, mentors and teachers. A lot of our work is invisible; keystone species don't wear their indispensability on their sleeves.

The invisible nature of our work

It is a traditional part of our professional practice to protect our clients from the messy details of our work

- the many different places we look & people we talk with

- what worked
- what didn't
- refinements / deletions/ paper & e-trails
- how long it took **really**.

Few people have much of an idea of what librarians **do** and are unaware of how libraries work, our 'therapist' activities are largely invisible and there's a real temptation to assume librarian's work can easily be automated.

Values

A library is an integrated system of people, technology, practices, and values. Our values are too complex to program. Our work honours complexity. The values that promote robust, diverse ecologies are extensibility, diversity and creativity. We also honour the values of privacy, service and respect (for the uniqueness of the question).

Three important things that librarians do are: information therapy, mediation between clients and technology and quality and cost control. We analyse queries and help people determine what they *really* need, we modify as we go, continuously refining goals, at times concluding the client does not always know what's best, we make cross reference linkages between people, systems and local knowledge. We mediate between the client's perceptions, expectations and reality, taking into account variant information seeking behaviours and we help them choose the best 'fit'. To do this we talk to people, we talk to each other and we evaluate intermediary results, filtering, and sorting. We make connections, we evaluate resources *over time and above all* we incorporate values. We are amazing and indispensable and our efforts are largely unrewarded and unacknowledged by our clients because what we do is too complex to explain.

Recurrent themes in the broader library literature illustrate some of the difficulties new librarians are experiencing in their professional culture.

The Generational Divide

New graduates are finding there is a divide between the three generations currently working in the library environment. These differences can create discord when practices clash around differing core beliefs. New graduates are finding it hard to accept the 'traditionalist' nature of the profession, they don't like lack of openness to new ideas, they find the dress codes oppressive and are having a hard time discovering their role in the job. They also feel their intellectual freedom is stifled by bosses who expect them to be 'ciphers' in a rigid hierarchical, bureaucracy where power sharing is not an option.

The new generations work differently to the present managers. They are highly collaborative, they multi-task and they insist on open and honest communication and frequent feedback. Some managers see the latter as 'needy' and emotional and it can create unnecessarily tense working environments. They are highly interested in what the job can give them, how it can contribute to their professional life and so will demand professional development opportunities and open access to life-long learning experiences. They dislike micro-management or the 'command and control' environment where "no news is good news" and information trickles down on a 'need-to-know' basis from the top. They love their job but they also love life and are not averse to missing a Friday meeting in the interests of a long weekend of skiing. This is liable to horrify older managers who see this kind of prioritisation as a lack of commitment and rigour.

Communities of Practice

Etienne Wenger's area of expertise is 'communities of practice'. He says we belong to many different 'types' formal and informal, work-related and life-related. Often we are distanced from the bigger picture and the organisations in which we work remain an 'abstraction'. What is real for us on a day-to-day basis is where we live among our peers. He stipulates that members of a community are informally bound together by what they do together and by what they have learned through their engagement in these activities. Communities of Practice 'develop around things that matter to people...their

practices reflect their own understanding of what is important and they arise as people address recurring sets of problems together, they develop in effect, a communal memory (p3).

When you are new to an organisation Communities of Practice are initially what you create to 'work around' rigid structures. Knowing of their existence or that they can be created and are a valid and useful construct is of vital importance to new librarians who have not yet gained entry into the corridors of power in their organisation. In some instances one's very survival if not emotional well-being may depend on them. Less dramatically they are organic creations that arise out of the need for people to share and solve common problems together.

Wenger's contribution not only to critical theory but to organisational culture is to give value to Communities of Practice in the organisational framework, so that managers may see how they can be utilised for the greater good. This is not to remove their ownership from the 'workers' it merely demonstrates their value ought to be acknowledged and supported. He says' "Organisations can support Communities of Practice by recognising the work of sustaining them; by giving members the time to participate in activities; and by creating an environment in which the inherent value of Communities of Practice is acknowledged, giving people an opportunity to talk about how they participate in these groups contributes to the organisation as a whole" (p5). He ends with a word of caution for managers. "The art is to help such communities find resources and connections without overwhelming them with organisational meddling" (p6).

Reflection

What communities of practice exist in your organisation?

What can you do to facilitate them?

What does the literature say?

Tools

Read, read, read the critical theory (otherwise known as 'the literature') Not only Information Science but also education and broader areas of specificity

e.g. I often read engineering education journals, online teaching journals, adult education journals, articles about Generation Y, indigenous education etc. You need to know what your client base's issues, priorities and trends are so you can engage them in *meaningful* conversations about what matters *to them*, otherwise you're just another librarian pushing a barrow and they tune out.

Survival Tips

- Be reflective and committed to life-long learning – don't stagnate in a pool of complacency or think you know it all. Coming from a place of omniscience closes you off to further learning and growing.
- Timing & Context: Know when to make yourself and your processes 'visible'. Become practiced at choosing a time that will make the most impact.
- Negotiate for what you want, know who has the power to effect change whether informally or formally.
- Be patient and respectful to what has gone before – there's nothing more likely to create barriers for you than dismissing the decades of effort others have put in – as a newcomer you aren't likely to know what projects have gone before or how much work has already been done on initiatives – make it your role to find out – research – talk to people (make an effort to establish relationships with the long-timers who have 'seen everything before') find out why initiatives didn't work first time around, read internal documents.
- Be adaptable – you're not going to find the perfect place to be in the first 6 months. You may have to do things you don't want to do at first, in areas that hold little interest to you (e.g. cataloguing when you want to do reference, web authoring when you want to teach). Look at everything as something you can put in your 'kit', diversity and adaptability are very attractive to employers. Specialisation is okay if that's what your heart's set on but it closes off opportunities for wide ranging experience and the ability to 'go sideways' into another area if that's what's needed. Areas close off in this profession all the time as the social, political, economical and technological environment changes, and it is always changing, e.g. ready-reference queries have given way to Google; face-to-face reference work

can be done via chat-rooms, SMS and email; reader education has changed into information literacy and student centered learning; the library as a physical place has given way to the library on the web and collections are less book centered and more electronic. Adaptability in this amorphous environment is the key to survival

- Talk to one another – break the ‘culture of silence’ share information, resources, experiences and knowledge. Work co-operatively not competitively – information is not *owned* it is shared in order to create knowledge.
- Celebrate your successes! – don’t be silenced on those, it is not arrogance it is ability and all can benefit.
- Be honest about when things go wrong! – we are only human and coming up against problems is an opportunity to learn collaboratively
- Use Brookfield’s 4 lenses *always* as a professional framework to ensure the integrity of your practice: try it with your next major project it will ensure you’re being objective, considerate of the needs of all those involved and informed by the latest research
- Create Communities of Practice and sustain them – demand they be supported (time, space, resources).

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