

## New Professional Conference

**What is it like to be a library and information professional in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

### Meeting the Challenge: Gaining Skills in the Social Aspects of Libraries

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Good morning first of all I'm going to speak to you about why I wanted to become a librarian, before moving on to discuss how new professionals can lack experience, especially in the social aspects of librarianship.

So what was it that attracted me to this career?

Well when I was little, I imagined a job where I got to read all day whilst occasionally recommending good books to users. Unfortunately, I soon found out that this was not the case. However, in doing so I came to realise just how varied the occupation is and more importantly the vital role it plays for people and communities

I see the librarian's/information professional's function as someone who is able to:

Help people find the information they need	Enquiry service
Organise things (eg: books, information, web sites) so that they can be found/searched easily	Cataloguing/indexing/tagging
Give excellent customer service	Customer Service
Be innovative in the use of new technologies and adopting new ideas	IT and technical skills
Improve society, through working towards social inclusion and lessening the digital divide	Social aspects
Adapt to a constantly changing and evolving role. Who could have imagined the impact the internet would have a decade ago	Adaptability

Ultimately, the main attraction for me is the diversity, which is embedded in librarianship:

- The diverse range of people we serve
- The diverse range of people we work with, immediately and in partnership
- The diverse range of types of work which come the library and information umbrella

I see all these skills as being necessary to being a good librarian/information professional. But how does one go about gaining them?

I myself took the traditional route of a first Arts degree followed by a graduate trainee year and then a Master's in Information Management. So one would think that this path would provide all the necessary skills to gain a professional

position. However, this is not the case, graduate trainee years often focus on basic tasks, such as reservations, periodicals, and working on the issue desk instead of answering enquiries, and subject liaison for example. And LIS courses do not put the skills they teach into a practical context.

For instance, Government policy is very much focussed on Social inclusion at the moment, but only a little time if any is devoted to the social aspects of librarianship in LIS courses. Of course, you may be sat there thinking that this topic is irrelevant to me, as I don't work in a public library. Before giving this presentation, I thought the same thing, but having researched the topic, I came to see how it could affect every area of librarianship and by the end of my talk, I hope you can too.

So what do you think a library does? What is its purpose? Any suggestions please...

The Museum, Libraries, and Archives Council defines libraries as places where children learn to love books and reading, where people of all ages have access to the knowledge and information they need to enrich their lives and the world around them.

They are at the heart of formal and personal learning, building individual and community identity and enabling creativity (MLA, 2007).

But what about those who are socially excluded?

You may have received an email or heard about the world as 100, where someone (no-one is sure who) has shrunk the world to a village of 100 people. I found this a very interesting concept and decided to see if something similar could be done for the UK. Unfortunately, due to the UK's population being much smaller shrinking to 100 did not work very well, so it has been shrunk to 1000 to make the statistics more apparent:

79 people out of a 1000 would be non-white of which:

- 20 Black
- 18 Indian
- 13 Pakistani
- 12 Mixed
- 4 Chinese
- 12 Other

284 in a 1000 would be non-Christian of which:

- 27 Muslim
- 10 Hindu
- 16 other
- 231 non-religious/unspecified

In our village of a 1000, 198 would be aged between 0-16 years, 320 would be 16-40 years, 301 would be 40-65 years, and 181 would be over 65.

9 people would be illiterate

100 people would live in a rural area

2 people would be prisoners

5 people would be Refugees or asylum seekers

4 people would be travellers (gypsies)

143 people would have English as their 2nd language

135 people would have mental health problems

166 people would be disabled

The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) policy action team on social inclusion and the Cabinet Office's social inclusion unit have identified the following groups as categories for inclusion:

- Prisoners and ex-offenders
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Travellers
- Children in Care
- Those lacking in basic skills or have English as their 2<sup>nd</sup> language
- People with mental health problems
- Housebound people
- Homeless
- 
- Mixed race
- Black and ethnic minority groups
- Religion and culture
- Disabled
- Elderly
- Unemployed
- Children and young people
- Rural isolation
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender

(Turner)

From the statistics of our village, we can see that many of them could have a high risk of becoming excluded. Therefore, it is vital that there is a policy/policies in place to include them.

But what does it mean to be excluded? The British Library defines social exclusion as when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill health, and family breakdown. When such problems combine, they can create a vicious cycle. Social exclusion can happen because of problems that face one person in their life. But it can also start from birth. Being born into poverty or to parents with low skills still has a major influence on future life chances (British Library, accessed 11/05/2009).

This translates into libraries in the following ways:

#### Institutional barriers

- Opening hours which are unsuitable or unduly restrictive
- Charges, which disadvantage those on low incomes
- Inappropriate staff attitudes and behaviour
- Strict rules and regulations
- Book stock policies, which do not reflect the needs of the community or are not in a suitable format
- Lack of adequate facilities, such as disabled access or suitable signage

#### Personal and Social barriers

- Low income and poverty
- Lack of basic skills in reading, writing and communication
- Lack of a permanent address
- Parental signature requirement

#### Perceptions and Awareness barriers

- People who are educationally disadvantaged don't think libraries are relevant to their lives or needs
- Lack of knowledge of facilities and services
- And how to use them

#### Environmental barriers

- Difficult physical access into and within buildings
- Poor transport links
- Institutional nature of the building
- Problem estates and urban decay
- The isolation problems experienced by those in rural communities

(DCMS, 1999)

These problems at first glance all seem to be more applicable to public libraries, but all of these difficulties can occur in any library or information sector. I will now give some brief examples of how social exclusion can manifest in the different sectors.

The Government's policies to have all young people receive education or training until they are 19 by 2015 and to have 50% of them in higher education means that college and university libraries need to ensure that their policies reflect everyone as there will be many more students from poor and low education backgrounds than previously (Times Higher Education, 2003). In addition, UK colleges and universities are now admitting more foreign students than previously. Approximately 6% of students are from overseas, who require much more help, and support than native students as English is often not their first language (UCAS, accessed 27/05/2009).

In schools, school libraries need to encourage children in care, children from low income backgrounds, and immigrant children to use the school library as this has been shown to have a positive effect on their education, social skills and general wellbeing (DCMS, 2009).

In commercial and government libraries, it is necessary to make sure that all abilities are catered for. As those with backgrounds traditionally viewed as open to exclusion can face discrimination and prejudice so that they often do not reach positions of power and influence at work (Dutch and Muddiman, 2001). Libraries and information services can help to remove these prejudices and aid those prone to this discrimination improve themselves. In addition, due to the fact that the working population is aging as more and more people choose to work after retirement age. Services should also be able to support users who are not as quick to adopt new technologies.

Finally, in health libraries they often need to be able to meet the different needs of highly educated doctors and researchers alongside the lower requirements for nurses.

In addition, many groups such as race, religion and culture, GLBT, and disability can occur in any type of library. Does your service meet their requirements?

If not how can you go about working towards a service that does? From the recent Career Development Group national conference: Your Wish is My Command (2009) Maxine Melling's presentation 'Us and Them' outlined a community-based model for creating a service which is inclusive, which I found very helpful.

Identification of Needs	
Traditional Model	Community-based Model
Data	Meet people where they are most comfortable
Statistics	Connect first, then consult (takes time)
User-surveys	Build relationships based on trust and respect
Comment cards	
Demographic trends	
Service Planning	
Senior staff develop services	Library and community act as partners
Proposals to address identified priorities	Community involved in stock/service selection
Staff are consulted	Work collaboratively to develop policy recommendations
Reference to literature/conferences	

Some recent examples of projects where this more community focused model is evident are:

- Enfield libraries whose staff have attended training run by One to One about welcoming people with learning difficulties (January Update p.54)
- Alloa library in Clackmannanshire has started a Polish collection for migrant workers and their children (March Update p.13)

- Warwickshire's strategies for meeting the needs of migrant workers (May Update p.32)
- The Reading Agency's new website Groupthing.org for encouraging teenagers to read (May Update p.45)

So how can LIS students develop these skills? Guest speakers from success projects could deliver a talk about their initiative, this will typically be the librarian/information professional who has worked on the scheme, but if possible, it would be beneficial if some of the excluded people could also speak about their experiences.

Another option would be to get students involved in running projects in their university, local schools, colleges, communities and businesses. Not only would they gain skills in the social aspects of librarianship, but they would also gain practical experience in team working, collaborating with partner institutions, project management, finance, and improve their customer service skills to name a few. All of which should help improve their chances of gaining their first professional post.

In conclusion, I hope you can now see how social exclusion is a problem for all library sectors and have learnt possible strategies for overcoming these problems in your library services. As well as identifying ways in which these skills can be incorporated into modern LIS courses.

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