

CILIP Umbrella Conference 2009 – Making Connections

Librarian: A rose any other name? - Toni Franck

Thank you for attending this session. I work for the Library & Learning Service in Lincolnshire. My colleagues will tell you that a little of me goes a long way, so I do not propose to talk at you for long. I will, I hope, be sufficiently controversial to provoke debate.

My presentation concerns the status of the professional librarian. I have experience only of working in the public library service in Lincolnshire, so I hope others can contribute their knowledge to this session. I have developed this presentation during the course of the Umbrella 09 conference, in light of the other sessions' pondering the professional debate.

Before I begin, please would you raise your hand if you do not have a professional librarian qualification. Please raise your hand if you do.

Introduction of topic

I know there is growing disquiet in the profession about erosion of professional status. I am not a professional librarian. My qualifications are in shorthand and typing.

I have worked for the library service for 15 years, and I love it. In those years, I have never known a user, from whatever background, no matter whether educated and articulate, to fail to make the mistake of assuming the person who helped them in the library today is a librarian. Paupers and princes, politicians and pundits, they all know us as librarians. Is it time to concede our professional divide, and to re-think our titles?

Through the years I have witnessed some of the foibles of professional librarians, coupled with the growing strengths of non professionals in delivering our service. Should we be encouraging all people who deliver the library service to become librarians? When you visit the CILIP website, this is

certainly what is being encouraged. But are non professionals out there visiting the website, or accessing the professional press? Should we change the way library services subscribe to the professional press, so the whole service is party to the process?

Professional background

I love librarians. You have your little ways, but as a body of people I applaud your honesty, your precision, your sincerity, your spirit of service. But mainly your honesty, and I urge public libraries to guard this fundamental value of librarians, and continue to resist the pressure towards 'gaming', towards massaging figures, in order to meet performance targets.

As we know, library user statistics have been in decline, and the librarians I worked with have been accordingly disillusioned. Speaking as a non-librarian, it is fitting, at this national conference, to challenge this despondency. The number of issues is impressive; it's massive. The number of visitors we have is a testament to our value to society – millions of people. Only schools reach the same breadth of society. Yet in libraries, we have impact across all ages. And of course, ironically, the credit crunch, as Charles Brown outlined for Charlotte and Mecklenbury, is an opportunity for us to improve performance by responding to the needs of those out of work and their families.

It seems to me entirely predictable that our figures are affected by societal changes, crucially the advent of access to media. Those of you as old as me will know that television viewing figures for Morecambe and Wise were far higher than those for popular programmes currently – Britain's Got Talent not excepted. Similarly, newspaper readership has been affected by alternative ways to learn the news, and book reading, like television viewing is affected by other sources of entertainment and information provision. We have a veritable panoply of visual entertainment and e-information.

In this context it makes sense to end the historic conflation of borrower and issue numbers with visitor numbers. Books are our core business, but

nowadays most people garner knowledge and information from the VDU; we need to count both sorts of user.

Our Head of Service became notorious nationally for pointing out that too many library users were middle-aged and middle-class. He was not Mr Popular in Lincolnshire either, when he remarked that most of our staff were middle-aged, middle-class white women.

I have made it my mission to challenge him. Though we can paint a pretty accurate picture of our borrowers, we do not know the socio-economic groupings of our users. Since the advent of PN, in our larger libraries a casual look at the people coming and going, suggests they are not all mortgage-paying middle management. Recently, our local paper ran an item about prostitutes visiting Lincoln Central Library. Well, yes, of course; everyone enjoys a good book. Good for them. The dilemma is that in order to garner sustained evidence of the type of souls we serve, we may dissuade many from using our service.... Who wants to be asked whether they own their property, are in employment, read the Guardian?

Charles Brown spoke of the professional divide in the USA. His team wisely saw that where division of labour diminishes service, it should stop.... Librarians do not stamp books. Well, if they don't, they should. They should fraternize with the masses, along with the best of us, rub shoulders with their fellow man.

Personal background

I became a part-time library assistant in Lincolnshire's schools library service in 1994. It was managed by professional librarians. I had 2 small children and a busy life, so the genteel pace of the librarians' regime suited me well. The bulk of my role was to put librarians' reviews into the date label of new stock, and to put one of each book on display. The display area was for school teachers (more professionals) to peruse. During the 3 years I fulfilled this role, there were 2 visits by teachers, around 5 or 6 souls.

Things changed when one of the librarians tragically was killed. Until then, planning the schools mobile routes was a professional task. With the untimely demise of the poor woman, suddenly this task was something for which I was, after all, competent.

Twice a year, the library service arranged a trip for local teachers to visit book suppliers. When I asked whether I could go on one of these trips to broaden my understanding, I was advised that it was not pertinent to my role, I was not a professional. So I went back to displaying books no-one looked at.

Later I worked as an assistant on the mobile library that visits sheltered housing and residential homes in the county. In this service, the professional librarian led a team of independent and capable non professionals from many walks of life. They were out delivering the service, there was no professional prop around, they had to use their initiative to ensure a good service. The hierarchy was functional, not decorative. In line with Charles Brown's delightfully US philosophy, these people were free to develop their potential.

We in local government are partial to organizational reviews. The first one I experienced brought about changes I deem improvements – narrowing the professional / non professional divide. In common with other authorities, we created a Library Bookstart Officer. In this role, I wrote a guide to story-telling. The Senior Librarian asked me to give training to the Children's Librarian as she had not learned how to tell stories. Despite this, she did not read a story to the group of children. Our next, and current, Head of Service, sustained and developed the outreach roles. These people are not professional librarians, but they do tell stories, they do engage with our users, they are creative and clever with their skills and resources. Currently, in common with other authorities, their roles work across the MLA spectrum.

Service background

Story-time in our largest library was held behind a locked door. When I challenged this, a professional librarian told me this was a) because there was insufficient space in the children's library (which I need hardly say, was bigger

than any of our small libraries), and b) that it was not safe for children to hear stories in the library in case they ran out onto the street (much further to the street than in our smaller libraries). I was astonished at this disingenuous justification for poor customer care. I wonder how many parents arrived with their children, saw no activity in the children's library, so went home.

A few years ago, we had a Bulgarian colleague who had the temerity to say that she felt we offered poor customer care in Lincolnshire. The ranks of people to whom this applied took umbrage. Interestingly, many to whom it did not, did too. She and I were summoned to observe; and what we observed was too much poor customer care. People with poor people skills became librarians and library assistants. In the past 10 years, this whole culture has been changing. The diverse routes into the profession reflect laudable pragmatism. Laudable because it encourages good people from varied backgrounds to become librarians.

Lincolnshire is a large county, with 48 branch libraries and 15 mobile libraries. For 4 years I have been responsible for half of the branch library provision. Most professional librarians give me fair treatment. They are excellent colleagues whose knowledge and precision we need. We all relish honest debate, and as I said earlier, librarians are big in the honesty stakes. One or two colleagues, professional and non, have challenged my authority – and I stumbled before I learned.

Professional concerns

Four years ago I became an Associate Member of CILIP and am a member of the Diversity Group. I am very proud of the work this Group achieves, and I reckon its status in the library world is testament to our professional awareness of changes needed. Yesterday's presentation to Margaret Watson by our Chair, Christie Ikeogu, exemplifies our values – your values, the values of the whole service. Said values, as Kevin Harris advised, need to be defined and promoted. Currently they are vulnerable because they are nebulous.

To be honest, I am not a bright and shiny star in the diversity group firmament. You would be hard placed to find a more indifferent Secretary than I contrived to be. Nonetheless, we work well together, we organise inspiring conferences, and we now have an excellent Secretary.

It is here, in the Diversity Group, and reading Update, that I have come to understand the strength of concern about the professional status of Librarians.

I concur. Your status is being eroded. You have to contend with upstarts like me. The challenge for all of us is to find the best way forward. This should be within our gift. We all want to deliver a good service. To be corny, we are part of the same team.

Professional comparisons

I have been looking at what happens in other professions. How do police officers view the advent of the PCSO role? Do teachers see class-room assistants as a threat? The medical professional has had an entrenched divide between doctors and nurses, displaying a hierarchy notable for its rigidity. What does the profession think of nurse practitioners, and the developing status of paramedics?

In these different fields, there is an evolution of roles comparable with the changes we are seeing in the library service.

Conversations I have had with police officers suggest that they do not resent the new roles or find them a threat. Their concern is that the PCSOs have such limited authority. The police officers' perception is that when an occasion demands police intervention, the PCSOs are obliged to call for backup. This understanding of the use of the PCSO needs to be put into context. Research is constantly being undertaken to establish the relationship between actual crime and people's perception of their risk of being victims of crime. There is a sound argument to say that the perception is proving more intractable than the occurrence. So if a PCSO reassures the community with

a police presence, and quite plausibly also deters low level crime, then their role is valuable.

In the L-word debate, our users call all of us librarians, which suggests they are confident a librarian is delivering the service – their perception is their reality. Is this a case to review our job titles to reflect our users' understanding of the library service?

I have spoken with a number of teachers about the impact of class room assistants on their work, and the increasing incidence of these assistants going on to become qualified teachers. The teachers may have had concerns at first, but now this role is well-respected, as is the progression to professional teacher. It should be borne in mind that the teachers' unions are seen as powerful, so teachers may feel a level of security in their professional status that is not shared by professional librarians.

I suggest that the teaching profession's model should be fostered in our work. That is, not to feel threatened, but to use the options available to encourage able colleagues to become qualified. However, I am aware from conversations with professional librarians that we may be in danger of losing a body of knowledge that will be difficult to replace. In our own authority, there is healthy debate about the poor health of our music collection. Without a specialist librarian, the key to accessing the collection may be lost. On the other hand, with the advent of the internet, and growing competence in navigating the web, are the specialists becoming redundant? Does the internet open up the opportunity for everyone to be able to find what they need? The gate is open; do we need the gate-keeper?

John Feather's talk made me think more closely about the impact of the world-wide web, and the information professionals it has generated who do not see CILIP as relevant. At the same, CILIP is leaching librarians into the information professionals' world.

A way to frame this shifting of roles and allegiance is to consider the library service in the context framed by Kevin Harris, who is making me re-assess the 'publicness' of public libraries – who we serve and how. The advent of the web brought educated, articulate members of society on board in the 1980s, while libraries, rightly in my view, kept access to reference books for the majority, who were without the technology and skill.

By the 1990s, the imperative for people in all walks of life to understand, and have access to, the burgeoning technology, meant that the arrival of free web access via the People's Network was most timely. Nonetheless, too many libraries have kept dusty reference sections – comfort blankets for established library users (and established library workers)?

A comparison with the medical profession must be judicious. There's no getting away from it – nurses and doctors work in life-threatening crises, so a rigid hierarchy serves. This became ossified in the health service, and rank held sway. The introduction of nurse practitioners was the result of a pragmatic look at who does what, and who is capable, rather than who is eligible.

In a real sense, this is similar to our current position – looking at professional status and its value, looking at non-professional skills and knowledge and comparing their value.

I don't have the answer. I felt as a non professional it could be useful for you to hear my version of the truth. It would be invaluable to hear yours.

Toni Franck