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Integrating Theory and Practice: The Role of the Professional Library Association

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The professional life of the library manager is complex. The Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA) Web site illustrates this complexity. It names four broad conditions under which library managers operate—cultural, technological, economic, and political—each of which brings a unique set of issues and challenges.[1] The seven topical sections that make up the internal organizational structure of LAMA add another layer of complexity reflecting the functional areas library managers must serve: building and equipment; fund-raising and financial development; systems and services; human resources, public relations, and marketing; organization and management; and measurement, assessment, and evaluation.[2] As this structure accurately suggests, library managers face many challenges in varying degrees of breadth and depth.

Library and Information Science (LIS) students and recent LIS graduates may not yet be confronting these management challenges, as librarians new to the profession are not typically thrust into management positions. Though they may be aware of the issues and challenges in running a library or a library unit, most do not yet view their work through a management lens. Instead, LIS students and recent graduates enter the profession having spent the last few years balancing theory and practice in a learning environment. The curriculum in most LIS schools offers both perspectives, providing theoretical underpinnings along with knowledge and experience of current practice. Yet, it is often the case that the theory and the practice remain separate, if not in opposition, in students' minds. Librarians entering the field are likely to be versed in theory and ready to begin the practice, but may not have had enough basic experience to bridge those worlds. The nature of the LIS profession does little to assist in this endeavor. As students graduate from LIS programs, the professional paths they follow create an initial divide between the theory and practice. Those who move into professional positions in libraries and archives enter the world of the practitioner; those who continue in academia are enveloped in theory and research.

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Professional library associations can help to integrate theory and practice in librarianship. Though the associations do much in the way of supporting these as independent endeavors, they do not always take the lead in merging them. There is a need and an opportunity for associations to reach out with new ideas for bringing together theory and practice to a wider set of stakeholders, including library school students, newly minted as well as more seasoned professionals, academics, and consultants. This essay looks at the theory/practice divide in LIS and particularly in library management, describes some examples where integration of theory and practice can occur, and suggests some specific ideas that library associations can implement to strengthen their role in bringing together theory and practice.

The Theory/Practice Gap

It is not new to suggest there is a gap between theory and practice in library and information science. The topic has been addressed for some time in a variety of publications and by different stakeholders in the field. Some examples over the years include the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Library Programs reports from the mid-1980s that looked at the question of the role of research in library and information science; McClure and Hernon's 1991 book, *Library and Information Science Research: Perspectives and Strategies for Improvement*; and the 2005 book by Bill Crowley, *Spanning the Theory-Practice Divide in Library and Information Science*, (2005).[3] Further, the dichotomy is felt in library administration and management, as evidenced by Lynch's chapter, "Research, Theory, and the Practice of LIS" in the McClure and Hernon book.[4] Just recently, the journal *Library Management* announced a new column in that publication entitled "Theory, Research, and Practice in Library Management," which aims to link library management practices with the relevant research and theory.[5]

Why is there tension between researchers and practitioners? To describe the gap in simple terms, practitioners argue that the theory and research generated from academia do not address real-world problems nor offer useful solutions to them. Researchers claim practitioners rely too

heavily on anecdotal accounts of "how we did it in our library" and ignore or reject the research being conducted. Factors exist from both sides to create division between theory and practice. Practitioners operate in fast-paced environments. Problems arise in real life requiring quick decision-making, leaving little or no time for careful analysis of the research literature that might be relevant. Many libraries lack sufficient resources and cannot afford to allocate staff time toward identifying, reading, and analyzing research to find solutions or strategies. Also, real-life situations are always uniquely embedded in specific contexts that may extend beyond the research situation. Managers reviewing the literature must consider the transferability of the findings from the research context to their own situation, which may seem too different from their own environments to be useful.

I have observed this phenomenon in my own dissertation research. My study follows the work of a group of library managers in a public library system tasked with addressing the issue of accountability across the system.[6] As I observe their discussions of the problem of accountability, several concepts from the theoretical literature come to mind—such as organizational culture change, motivational theory, and organizational citizenship behaviors—that might provide useful frameworks to help the group understand the problem and look for solutions. Instead of management research, the only literature the group has tapped into is Rudy Giuliani's book, *Leadership*.[7] They seem to find this particular resource helpful for its clear, succinct writing style and vivid examples pulled from Giuliani's real-life experiences. In terms of accessibility, the Giuliani book fits within the constraints of these managers, whereas the theoretical literature does not.

From the theoretical side, the primary audience for most research is not practitioners. Researchers generally operate in the academic environment that rewards published research in quality, peer-reviewed journals. Articles of this nature are evaluated less on specific outcomes that might be useful to practitioners and more on the novelty of the research idea, the rigor of the research method, and the thoroughness of the analysis. The current peer-review system, designed to be a fair and reasonable quality control system for promoting good work for publication, has its own problems. As many disciplines have grown and changed over time (LIS is an excellent example), reviewers may not be sufficiently familiar with the breadth of the discipline, new theoretical frameworks, or methods used in the works they review. Reviewers of exploratory studies may not be able to authenticate the findings put forth in the research without replicating the study, leaving them only to comment on the efficacy of the research design.[8] And though the peer-review process is usually a blind review, experts in a particular area are often familiar enough with each other's work so that researchers with an established reputation in a field may not be subject to the same level of scrutiny as unknown researchers, which undermines the purpose of peer review.

Another issue for researchers is the pressure to produce novel, innovative research. Knowledge is built by studying a phenomenon from many angles, adding layer upon layer of findings to what already is known. To make a contribution, there must be something new in the researcher's work. This emphasis on "newness" can cause theorists to veer to the extreme by asking esoteric research questions that might rightly be viewed as out of touch with the real-life concerns of practitioners. McClure describes where the disconnect lies between researchers and practitioners:

> In general then, library researchers are trained to produce applied research with some generalizability. The research should be suitable for publication in refereed journals and it should advance knowledge. Library managers require action research that has high internal validity for their particular library setting. The research must be uncomplicated, specify implementation strategies, and solve problems. Clearly, these are two differing perspectives.[9]

Crowley applies a slightly more nuanced distinction. He describes two types of theory: the faculty-centered internal effectiveness model of useful theory and the practitioner-inclusive external effectiveness model of useful theory.[10] The first, he asserts, is driven by "how well it assists a faculty member in achieving the goals of tenure, promotion, and continuing influence on the direction taken by a profession or discipline."[11] The second is directed toward solving problems in the practice. There are perils to following either type too rigidly. Adherence to the practitioner-inclusive theory risks exclusion from the reward structure within the academy; but the theory-for-theory's-sake stance tends to produce results too abstract to be useful or interesting to anyone, which is equally risky.

Another source of theory/practice tension exists in LIS education, which I have experienced personally. I have heard it in the hallways of the different library schools I have attended, and I even said it myself years ago when I pursued my master's degree, "Why do I need to know the theory of Taylor, Dervin, Kuhlthau, Maslow, Vroom, or Simon since I am going to be working in a library?" In spite of LIS faculty's best efforts to present theory and tie it to practice, many master's students place greater importance on developing job-related skills rather than learning theory which, though interesting in the abstract, may be lost among the many workload demands once they are out in the practice. The reverse of this situation can occur among students in library science Ph.D. programs. Presenting comprehensive exams, assisting with faculty research projects, and writing a dissertation require an intensive, narrow focus on bodies of theory and conceptual frameworks. In some programs, students are steered away from action or practitioner research. When graduation

looms and job talks are scheduled, doctoral students surface from their work only to realize that being occupied so intensely on research has come at the price of being out of touch with the practice. In both cases, the tendency is toward an "either/or" instead of a "both/and" treatment of theory and practice.

Successful Integration

Practice and theory are not *dichotomous* in the literal sense, according to Merriam-Webster (M-W) Online Dictionary, which defines the word as "a division into two especially mutually exclusive or contradictory groups or entities."[12] Ironically, though, the editors at M-W use theory/practice as the example. In fact, theory and practice cannot be mutually exclusive—they inform each other. A better word to characterize the relationship between theory and practice is *symbiotic,* defined by M-W as: "1. the living together in more or less intimate association or close union of two dissimilar organisms; 2. a cooperative relationship (as between two persons or groups)."[13]

Theories are explanations of phenomena; they are tied inductively, deductively, or both, to observations *in the real world,* be it biological, physical, or social.[14] They are derived from practice, and particular applications or instances of the phenomenon might disprove or extend theory. They exist in tandem, not at odds. The research that develops from and contributes to theory in LIS generally, and library management specifically, is wholly dependent on data that can be collected from real-life practice. When this link is acknowledged, finding meaningful ways to integrate theory and practice is not only beneficial, but essential to growth in the field.

There is a trend in the literature that seeks to find a middle ground between researchers and practitioners. One place where the two can be integrated is in research design. For example, McClure introduced the idea of "good enough" data for cases when practitioners need adequate data for timely analysis and solutions rather than gathering time-consuming, but more statistically reliable data.[15] This is not to suggest that researchers and practitioners should disregard methodological rigor in their work, but it acknowledges that practitioners seek strategies and solutions to put into action rapidly. Delaying decisions in order to adhere to the most stringent methodological practice may be less important than making relevant inferences from an adequate set of data that can be translated quickly into strategies that can be implemented.

Another place where theory and practice can be bridged is in the conceptual framing of research. Crowley emphasizes the importance of pragmatism in theory, referring to the notion of the "useful theory" as the practical best theory that addresses the way things work in real-life settings.[16] He cautions against allowing personal ambition or excessive fastidiousness in developing theory, arguing instead for proposing a theory that solves actual problems and avoids overstatement. The danger in exaggerated theoretical claims, he writes, is that, "At some point, the most effectively analyzed experience, even when coupled with the latest in computer-enhanced reasoning will fail to generate accepted explanations or fall short in predicting new occurrences."[17] Useful theory, then, is theory connected with practice to help define problems and develop solutions.

Thomas G. Kirk Jr.'s case study in *Library Administration & Management,* which linked contingency theory with a day-to-day staffing problem in his organization, is an example of how practice and theory can be successfully merged in the literature.[18] Providing a thoughtful application of contingency theory to his own library's situation, Kirk demonstrated an effective use of theory as a framework to guide internal decision-making. This approach is appealing in that it combines real-world situations with relevant theory in a way that allows for meaningful critique. The type of analysis in this article tests the theory and also offers solutions to those facing similar problems.

The Role of Professional Library Associations

Despite some efforts to integrate practice and theory, more can and should be done. Professional library associations can make a major contribution to this endeavor. For several reasons, the major library associations such as ALA and all of its constituent divisions, the Special Library Association (SLA), the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIST), and the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), are optimally positioned to lead efforts to reconcile the theory/practice division.

First, the membership of each of these associations consists of practitioners, researchers, and consultants of all types and levels of experience. This implies that the various viewpoints on the value of theory and practice are represented in the membership, including the perspectives of academic deans, library directors, frontline practitioners, and independent consultants. By identifying the various constituencies within these groups, the next step might be to create opportunities to bring them together.

Second, library associations as entities are *of* the field and *in service to* the field, but they are not the field itself. Though their membership includes both researchers and practitioners, the associations are neither the academy nor practicing organizations. They are, however, viewed as supporting the interests of the broad LIS field, speaking both the language of the practitioner and the researcher. With status that is recognized as credible by both sides, associations can offer solutions that integrate their common concerns.

Finally, library associations are well-suited for this role because they already independently support research and practice through a variety of initiatives. Fisher argues that associations bring value to the profession by encouraging research that feeds the theoretical knowledge base, and also by encouraging the professional development of members through educational opportunities including conferences, workshops, instructional sessions, and so forth.[19] In support of the practice of librarianship, associations bring people together to discuss relevant, timely topics in the field through conferences and other events. They raise awareness of salient issues and challenges to a larger audience through advocacy and education. Through their publications, members stay current with developments in the field. They encourage professional development and offer career support services. Additionally, support of research activity comes from such forums as the ALA's Library Research Round Table (LRRT) or the SLA's Research and Development Committee. Schwartz and Hernon provide specific examples of how several major LIS professional organizations support and encourage research-related activities by identifying fifty-one grants or awards, from seven professional associations, for research activities.[20] One example of this, the Carroll Preston Baber Research Grant given by the ALA, is awarded to research that seeks to answer a question vital to the library community, and the award guidelines note specifically that projects involving a practitioner and a researcher are welcome.[21] These are only a few examples of the commitment library associations make to nurturing and supporting the practice, as well as to champion LIS research.

Integrating Theory and Practice

Having established that professional library associations already do tremendous work supporting practitioners and researchers, there is more that can be done. The ideas presented here offer some additional suggestions for professional associations to influence the integration of theory and practice:

- Define a research agenda based on real life problems in the practice. These can be solicited from practitioners and refined through group discussion to an appropriate level of generalizability. Publish or share this agenda through other means with library and information science schools.
- Sponsor and fund research activities that require partnerships between researchers and practitioners. Consider partnering with other library associations for added impact and increased funding dollars.
- Solicit articles for association magazines, journals, or other publications that specifically integrate theory and practice. One example could be, as Lynch suggests, pieces that synthesize the "how we done it good in our library" articles and frame them in the relevant theoretical perspectives.[22] Another example might be a literature review of popular and theoretical literature on a particular topic that integrates findings and solutions.
- Offer instructional sessions on how to design research projects that address real life problems. Discuss the appropriate methods and analysis and plan for effective communication of the results.
- Create and maintain a list of organizations willing to be study sites for research.

An opportunity exists for professional library associations, such as LAMA, to lead the way in creating a new environment in the LIS profession that views practice and theory as compatibly linked. This opportunity benefits everyone in the field: practitioners at all levels and types of libraries, researchers in all areas of the field, consultants, and educators. Students and new librarians in particular stand to benefit because the outcome of such integration widens the professional landscape. Under this model, instead of having to choose a theory or practice path, new librarians can be encouraged to integrate their understandings about theory with their experience in the practice.

Library managers face numerous exciting and complex challenges. Support is available through the professional associations in the field. As new librarians graduate, enter the workforce, and begin to assume management positions, many features of professional associations are attractive to them: personal and professional growth through networking, continuing education opportunities through workshops and conference programs, career development through résumé reviews and mentoring, and leadership opportunities on committees. Beyond these important considerations, library associations can offer new librarians an environment in which to be engaged so that theory and practice can be truly integrated. Such an atmosphere improves both theory and practice, setting a model for new partnerships among association members and extending the benefits of affiliating with professional associations.

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