Philosophy!

Julie Todaro

For most of my professional life (and note I say *professional* life), I have been involved in advocacy initiatives for legislators, administrators, community members, and board members. These initiatives have included advocating for legislation, funding, policies, and—overall—inclusion of the library in the decision-making processes of the infrastructure of the city or county management or in the school district or company or higher education institution. At the heart of much advocacy, however, is the need to educate those to whom we are advocating about the "basics." These basics include—surprisingly—what libraries "do" and the role of the library within the institution, organization, or structure. In addition to this basic advocacy for what libraries do, I find myself constantly defining who we "are,"—that is, librarians are *professionals*, that do what *professional* librarians do. I am explaining what being a professional librarian means and how it differs from "the employee—with different skills and education—who was put in charge of the company's materials in addition to his job," or the individual taken from the classroom and "put in charge of the library" as is often the definition used by the administrator or bureaucrat.

The reality is that in our business, or more specifically in our profession, we all have to be ready to articulate who we are and what we do. But specifically, and most importantly, the bigger picture of *why* we do what we do must be explained in the most basic terms. We need to be able to explain the philosophy behind what librarianship is, and what modern *library and information science* is, but even more importantly what *information* is and why librarians know best how to acquire, house, organize, describe, and make it accessible. Indeed, to specify why we exist.

So my point? Doesn't everyone already know this? Apparently not.

When you search the literature of our profession you get a fair number of articles articulating philosophy—most for specific areas of the field such as customer service and information literacy (IL). In addition, however, you get articles stating librarianship really *isn't* a philosophy. When you search our professional associations' websites, you get a variety of types of content—from one or two core competencies that include the need to know the philosophy of management and/or library science to type-of-library specific philosophies.

When you visit websites of library science graduate schools (no matter the name) you will find a variety of courses named "philosophy" of this and that and also specific curriculum on philosophy, again more specific or narrower elements such as technology issues. It stands to reason, therefore, that graduates of these professional programs should come out knowledgeable about philosophy, ready and able to articulate it in, among many other places, interview settings. But frankly, in my recent years of interviews, it's just not there. So what's happening and what's not happening in our librarians' interviews?

We include philosophy questions for general areas, including but certainly not limited to, philosophy of higher education, type of higher education environment, type of library, reference service, collection development, management, information literacy, customer service, and other areas including intellectual freedom, technology, and access to resources.

We expect interviewees to understand both philosophy in general and the philosophy of our profession.

We expect them to articulate a philosophy and not flounder around, such as asking for clarification or indicating they are unclear of what we are asking of them.

We expect, for example, when we ask them to articulate their philosophy IL that they give us PHILOSOPHY. Not the definition of what IL is, although that's obviously important, but rather *why* we provide IL and why it's important as well as why it might be unique in our setting.

But often, and more than once is too much, we are getting blank stares, silence, incomplete thoughts and confusion in response to these questions. In fact, we are getting surprised looks and comments like "philosophy?" "hmmmm, philosophy . . ." "Okay, let's see . . . philosophy."

So, do I doubt that we are a profession? No, the first element of a profession is the presence of a philosophy and there is a librarianship philosophy therefore librarians

Julie B. Todaro (jtodaro@austincc.edu) is Dean of Library Services, Austin (Tex.) Community College, and a frequent presenter of LLAMA regional institutes.

qualify as professionals. Other characteristics of those in professions include: professionals are considered experts, they have a high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge with a theoretical base, their primary orientation is to their public, they have a high degree of self-control of behavior and are governed by a code of ethics and this code of ethics is a statement of values, ensures a high quality of service, and guarantees competence of membership and honor and integrity. In addition, the code is a direct expression of the professions' principles of service orientation and emphasizes the lack of personal gain, and for all public service exchanges the protection of the patron. Finally, professionals have a system of rewards that is primarily a set of symbols of work achievement and the profession has a system of testing of competence of members.

Do I think people aren't being taught these elements in graduate school? No, I think the curriculum has the concepts of philosophy throughout many courses. Do I think people aren't being prepared for interviews? Quite possibly. I reviewed a variety of Web environments including library school websites, blogs, and so on and I found:

- A few philosophy questions but only philosophy of specific areas—most typically collection management, management, and filtering.
- Only one, maybe two sample questions on websites that even had the word philosophy in them.
- A question on the philosophy of education, rather than or in addition to philosophy of school librarianship as a sample question.
- Very few good examples of sample answers, just questions.
- Entire wikis on interviewing for library jobs with no philosophy questions.
- A website with over one hundred library science interview questions and only one specific mention of philosophy, and that was about philosophy of reference.

- Articles on interviewing for librarians in leading magazines with no mention of the possibility of philosophy questions.

Now does this list mean that nothing was intimated or suggested in interview questions? No, a number of other sample interview questions clearly indicated that the interviewer was requesting a philosophical-based approach to an answer would be the more successful answer.

So why is this so important? Why am I clearly on a high horse here? Why *should* librarians need to articulate philosophy? And what if the interviewer doesn't ask philosophy questions? Beyond the interview, librarians need to be able to explain to clients, patrons, managers, classroom teachers, customers, and so on *why* . . . and that *why* could include: why the young adult materials are there, why the computers are filtered and why they aren't, why reference questions are answered as they are, why library assignments are required in student curriculum, and so on. In addition, librarians need to be able to write grants, annual reports, and memos for management; support budget requests; and design goals, outcomes, and monthly reports.

Finally what if the interviewer doesn't ask philosophy questions? Candidates should, if not asked, bring up their own philosophy in the context of answering a question. That is, they should answer a practice question by explaining their idea or experience or thoughts on the practice of librarianship and then, when appropriate, build in their supporting philosophy of that practice. So, what do successful candidates do? They talk philosophy, even if only a little, and indicate they have awareness, familiarity, and knowledge of the professional elements of their field of study. Lastly, they can balance answers to questions by including practice and philosophy.