Core Competencies

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Concern for the future of libraries is misplaced. As long as education is held in high regard, as long as learning is seen as essential for success, the traditional core competencies of libraries—"providing resources and services that support and facilitate the creation and dissemination of knowledge," or in other words, "resources and services that support learners of all ages" will be vital.

—Robert S. Martin

What Are Core Competencies?

What, then, are these core competencies more specifically? What are the abilities, skills, capabilities, and values that embody the essence of librarianship and through which librarians can create value for citizens and students, sufficient value that they will want to support libraries with tax, tuition, and development dollars?

In 1999 an ALA task force undertook the identification of core competencies of our profession. In its recommendation to the ALA Executive Committee in the spring of 2002, the Core Competencies Task Force listed:

- Organization of knowledge resources
- Information and knowledge
- Service
- Facilitation of learning
- Management
- Technology
- Research

The text of the report provides these further delineations:

- Organizing collections of information resources in order that desired items can be retrieved quickly and easily.
- Connecting users with information, with and the corollary—understanding how information is created and disseminated in a changing intellectual environment.
- Facilitating access to information.
- Teaching and enabling learning.
- Managing applications of information-handling technologies, including working in partnership with technical specialists to shape information systems and proactively adopting new, emerging technology.
- Investigation leading to the creation and refinement of practice and the establishment of future directions in the library profession.[1]

In her description of the evolution of research libraries, Wendy Pradt Lougee identifies several "classic" library core functions and expertise that are typical of public, school, and special libraries as well:

- Collection Development—"A continuum of processes to select content appropriate for a particular community, make it accessible, manage it, and preserve it."
- Information Access—"Organizing and providing access to information . . . [bringing a] predictability and cumulative order to vast amounts of material." (In other words, the content is described so that it can be identified as valuable to potential users.)
- User Services—Direct assistance to users, "helping users identify, retrieve, and use resources, or educational activities to help patrons use their libraries more effectively."
- Library As Place—A location for individuals and information to interact, "a place for users to tap collections or for library staff to bring users and information together . . . [and a place] for users to interact."[2]

Michael Sullivan, writing about the future of public libraries, suggests community as the characteristic differentiating public libraries from the Internet and bookstores:

> What they [citizens] need from us is to get their information and their reading in some sort of shared context. Everyone chips in, not just thirty tax dollars, but their reading lists, their interests, and their question as well. They filter this through a staff of people whose experience constitutes a gathering place for the needs of many. And what

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> do you call people who live together and read together? A community.[3]

I'm not sure community can be labeled a core competency, but as descibed by Sullivan, it can be considered something distinguishing and, as such, ought to be included here.

There is nothing startling in these lists. Also, for the most part, there is nothing on these lists that is not being done or cannot be done by teachers, computer professionals, corporate information specialists, or online information services.

Values

However, once these capabilities and functions are informed by the values that characterize librarianship, core competencies specific to the profession are clearer, as well as are the benefits librarianship and libraries create. Values of libraries and librarianship identified in current literature include:

- service;
- access;
- equity;
- learning;
- scholarship; and
- stewardship.[4]

The abilities and capabilities in the lists of core competencies, once enlivened by these values, do describe what is unique about librarianship. It is with this understanding that librarians need to approach the task of identifying services that will make a difference in the lives of citizens and students, the task of creating the public value—services that they will be willing to support financially.

Some Examples of Valued Services

Still, the way is far from clear. Lougee provides some help in a beginning understanding of how these core competencies will be carried into the teaching and learning environment of the twenty-first century.[5] The examples she describes, while drawn from universities, provide a sense of how library core competencies may evolve for public, special, and school librarians as well as academic librarians as we move forward.

When cataloging and classifying books and journals, librarians have used standardized principles to describe materials so as to be identifiable by potential users. These structures were rigid. Digitization provides flexibility and dynamism; metadata can include information about context and the item's use, how it is used, and by whom. The essence of what we have referred to as cataloging and classification continues—the description of content so it can be identified as useful to students and researchers, whether graduate students or high school students, faculty or local entrepreneurs.

The University of Virginia's proposed American Studies Information Community is described as drawing on:

> harvesting protocols to bring together disparate types of information (text, data, media, images) for a community, defined as a group of scholars, students, researchers, librarians, information specialists, and citizens with a common interest in a particular thematic area.[6]

This proposal highlights not only the recognition of a unique set of skills librarians bring to the learning process, but also the value of community in a learning environment, and collaboration as integral to learning in a digital environment.

Another model for research and learning in the twenty-first century is a collaboratory, such as the Space Physics and Aeronomy Research Collaboratory (SPARC):

> SPARC incorporates the ability to control remote telescopes and instrumentation, to review and collaboratively analyze observational data of atmospheric events, to create and archive vast amounts of research data, and to use tools to manipulate the data. To the extent that libraries begin to develop access techniques in response to a community and to support the potential development of collaboratories for these communities, we see them assuming a far more integral role within the scholarly arena.[7]

The Semantic Web is being defined as an extension of the Web in which:

> information is given a well-defined meaning better enabling computers and people to work in cooperation. . . . It brings together metadata, a language to structure the data, and a roadmap . . . that explains relationships between terms. These ingredients for knowledge representation—structured content, rich metadata, and a framework or ontology of representations—allow software agents in computer systems to make inferences and therefore retrieve more intelligently from the vast body of distributed information on the Internet.[8]

Librarians can bring to Semantic Web development descriptive techniques in metadata development, thesaurus development skills, and authenticity. With regard to authenticity, library users have trusted in the reliability and accuracy of library books and journal articles because of the shared understanding of the library's commitment

to truth and scholarship as well as an understanding that these sources have been thoughtfully selected. This tradition and respect place libraries in a position to bring this essential characteristic of trust to digital endeavors and content. Trust in digital descriptions and sources can be achieved through the library's role in description and by using new virtual mechanisms to convey context to users—conveying that the content has been examined, a decision has been made about its inclusion, and structures exist that can validate content and its source in the manner of book imprints.

The value of the Internet as an effective source for answers to fact-based queries raises questions about traditional reference services. At the same time, the more complicated questions students and citizens have, and the growing complexity of navigation in and between content locations in digital space, require both expert advice and help systems. Technology allows the combination of online instructions for in-depth searches, imbedded routing of queries, and real-time access to librarians. The creation of such systems is clearly within the core competencies of librarians. My observation of reference transactions in a local public library shows that this transition has begun. Citizens, frustrated searching for an answer on a computer at home, come to the library for assistance. The reference librarian, using her or his knowledge of systems of access and the most likely sources with an answer, develops and enhances the search the client has begun.

Lougee believes not only that there is a place for librarians in universities of the twenty-first century but that technology has opened possibilities for broader and deeper involvement in education and learning. Similarly, the phenomena she described: collaboration, integration of disparate groups toward specific learning needs, the power of technology to enhance communication, and the reality of virtual place are commonalities for public, school, and special libraries that can be mined in the communities within which these libraries exist.

Research libraries are not the only places in which librarians understand their changing environments and are taking advantage of new opportunities for library involvement. Public libraries have always been responsive to the changes in the environments of their user communities, identifying opportunities for broader and deeper involvement. Current examples range from new library buildings as focal points in urban development, shared facilities with a local university, and partnerships with commercial ventures, to state-of-the art technology infrastructures, technology classes for seniors, and DVD collections.

Conclusion

This awareness and responsiveness is, then, what is critical—to continue to constantly and effectively monitor the changing environment of one's library and the evolving needs of the library's users, with a readiness to change practice to meet new needs and to take advantage of new opportunities. The lists of competencies and values above are reminders; they focus attention on the unique capabilities of librarianship as these assessments occur.

So, to assure a vital future for your library, ever mindful of the essence of libraries and librarianship, follow the advice of Joey Rodger:

> The first step is to look at each service in the current portfolio and ask a core set of questions. Who uses it? What difference do we want it to make? How do we know what difference it makes in people's lives? What does it cost? . . . Then, identify feasible, value-added enhancements to our existing services.[9]

References

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