# A Holistic Look at Professional Development

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T he articles in this issue speak to the complexity of challenges facing libraries and librarianship. New technologies and increasing numbers and formats of resources, combined with decreasing budgets and the ever-present political issues associated with library services, create a challenging venue. This ever-changing landscape necessitates flexibility at every level of librarianship and in every type of library.

We know that library schools are faced with educating their entering students for a profession that may look very different ten years from now. In a recent article in *Southeastern Librarian*, Margaret Myers uses the term "mindboggling" to characterize the list of desirable skills and attributes pulled from the library literature to describe libraries and library workers for the twenty-first century.[1] Her list of skills includes problem solving, critical thinking, team building, synthesizing, and fund-raising, as well as negotiation abilities, political savvy, and an awareness of multicultural and group process concerns. Desirable attributes include flexibility, lifetime learning, risk-taking, proactivity, service orientation, articulacy, self-confidence, curiosity, and adaptability. Being an innovator, possessing the ability to thrive on chaos, and tolerating ambiguity round out the list. What seems to be expected, notes Myers, is "a super-person or a Renaissance person."[2] Nor do we have to wait for the next century; Myers notes that current librarians need these skills as well. Indeed, we all face daily the need to learn new skills, new sources, new ways of navigating in and amongst

these sources, and new ways of organizing and making information accessible. Patrons add another layer of complexity as we encounter a variety of capabilities and needs among our users. The formula is complicated further by the fact that, increasingly, these users are physically removed from us.

There are perhaps few other professions for whom the concept of "life-long learning" is so important. A review of the literature, a look at the variety of continuing education and professional development opportunities available, an examination of the variety of workshop and conference offerings attest to that fact. We have come far since Williamson's 1933 conclusion that there was "a conspicuous lack of both opportunity and incentive on the part of library workers, including library school graduates as well as others, to seek continued professional growth and improvement."[3]

The best evidence of our commitment to continued professional growth is found in our library associations. The Continuing Library Education Network and Exchange Round Table (CLENERT) was incorporated into ALA in 1984. The unit evolved from The Continuing Library Education Network and Exchange (CLENE), established at the Catholic University of America in 1975, was for some time the only association in the profession which held continuing education as its sole mission. Other library associations have followed suit by focusing on continued professional education as a priority and providing a widened selection of opportunities for members. Some have hired professional staff to initiate institutes, workshops,

and even self-study programs. A series of national seminars on continuing education has evolved into a competency-based certification system that is in place for the Medical Library Association (MLA). Each year the Office of Library Personnel Resources (OLPR) issues a brochure, "ALA Is Continuing Education," to provide an overview of continuing professional education opportunities available through the eleven divisions and sixteen round tables of ALA. In addition, participants can obtain ALA-awarded Continuing Education Units (CEU's) for many continuing professional education activities.[4]

## Professional Development Is a Lifelong Journey

Our professional development begins the first time the image of self as librarian flickers in our mind. We enter the profession with a mental image of who a librarian is and what a librarian does. Library school provides the foundations, philosophy, and specialties of the profession. The education we receive presents the opportunity, the mandate, to take control of our own direction and professional development. Upon graduation we are immediately faced with a mass of continuing library education opportunities.

Looking at professional development programs for research librarians, Shaughnessy has observed a general lack of focus. The assumption, he says, is that "in offering a smorgasbord of staff development opportunities, staff development occurs."[5] This situation is not unique to any particular group of librarians. It is fair to assume that the notion applies to our profession as a whole.

That brings us face-to-face with the maze of opportunities out there. Building on the analogy of a smorgasbord, we are confronted with many decisions. Where do we start? In what order do we sample the offerings? How much is enough? Can we go back for seconds? There are broader considerations as well. What is the quality of each product? What are the costs? What is the return on our investment?

Several authors have attempted to sort out the mass of professional development opportunities for librarians. This is no small task given the different types of libraries, our specialties within the profession, the level of academic preparation a librarian brings to the job, and even the point at which the librarian may be in his or her career.

Typical purposes of continuing education, according to Heim and Myers, include the introduction of new techniques or the continued development of special skills. They note four designations — institutes, seminars, conferences, and workshops — terms often used with little distinction.[6] Sponsors include universities, professional and educational associations, and government agencies. The offerings that library systems, corporations, and educational institutions provide their employees, as well as formal doctoral or certificate of advanced study programs, can all be considered continuing education, as can the various regularly scheduled conferences sponsored by library associations. Along with formal programs and committee meetings, these conferences often include exhibits, workshops, and opportunities for professional networking. The training that commercial vendors supply for their products falls under the umbrella of continuing education as well.

Another approach has been to survey groups of librarians to identify preferences for types of professional development opportunities. In an early study of continuing education preferences, Elizabeth Stone found attendance at professional meetings, professional committee activity, and workshop attendance to be the preferred modes of continuing education for librarians.[7] In a study of special librarians, Fisher found that in order of preference these librarians relied on vendor workshops, workshops organized by professional groups (library associations), in-house training, and workshops sponsored by academic institutions.[8] A later study of special librarians found that self-study ran a somewhat distant third to workshops and in-house

training in order of preference.[9]

Given the front-line positioning and attendant stresses faced daily by many librarians, one might be forgiven the tendency to let the sheer weight of so many opportunities and so little time (and money!) press us into a lethargy of sorts. While we pick and choose from among the many options, little long-range planning is involved in our individual journeys of professional growth. Something akin to "management by crisis" takes over as we frequently pursue new skills and learning on a spur of the moment, as-needed basis.

## Seeing the Big Picture

This may not be so bad. It reflects, in fact, one of the most basic of adult education tenets. Adult learners have real-world problems and are in search of real-world solutions. We want applicability. We want to take our newly acquired information and immediately put it into practice. With that in mind, the "shotgun" approach to professional development might seem to meet our needs.

Indeed, this approach is in keeping with one school of thought concerning how adults go about their learning. This scenario depicts a process which, rather than being linear, emphasizes "opportunities that people find within their own environments or on chance occurrences. What is stressed is that adults do not sit down and plan exactly what they want and where and when they are going to learn. Rather, the process is more haphazard in nature and is often a series of trial-and-error occurrences. This does not mean that there is no pattern to their learning, but the patterns vary from person to person and learning project to learning project."[10] From this perspective, our maze of professional development opportunities might be viewed as a blessing of sorts. The abundant selection provides the arena in which we can assume primary responsibility for our learning experiences.

But there are some overarching issues to keep in mind. In a 1991 article, Paul Frantz considered the subject of

how a reference librarian goes about developing his or her "repertoire of reference."[11] A process of bibliographic osmosis, a gradual accumulation of reference knowledge, will occur simply through time spent as a reference librarian. That is of little value, however, to the patron who needs an answer right now and is dealing with the librarian whose repertoire is not yet sufficient to meet this particular need. The scene is set for a frustrated patron as well as a frustrated and probably embarrassed librarian. This dilemma is not unique to reference librarians. Whatever the type of library or the job responsibility, a learning curve, an osmosis comes with time spent on the job. New technologies and the growing number of products ensure that we never reach the end of our learning curve. As Frantz points out, the challenge lies in finding ways to supplement and accelerate the process.

The second issue deals with transfer of training. In a thought-provoking chapter in *Developing Library Staff for the 21st Century*, Duncan Smith addresses "the educational ecology" of librarianship.[12] Smith, formerly the Continuing Education Coordinator at the School of Library and Information Sciences at North Carolina Central University, characterizes the nature of continuing library education as "event-focused" and occurring in organizational contexts that do not necessarily facilitate the transfer of the training back into the workplace. Shaughnessy, too, questions not only whether the learning that occurs at professional development programs is actually put into practice upon return to the workplace, but also whether new learning and ideas actually impact the organization itself upon one's return. Libraries, he maintains, "waste considerable sums of money on staff development programs that lead to zero growth for the librarian and have virtually no impact on the organization."[13]

To those of us who take advantage of professional development activities — who take classes, attend conferences, pre-conferences, workshops,

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even conduct them ourselves upon occasion, such judgments may sound harsh. Many of us partake of the smorgasbord, sometimes even at our own expense. We travel to distant locations; we allow travel time to encroach upon our personal time. We give up time with our families. I do not believe that anyone is implying that we do not gain from such activities or that our pursuits are not commendable. The issue, I believe, is how effectively all of this contributes to the overall context of our own professional growth.

Given the time and budgetary constraints under which each of us operates, we have a responsibility to ourselves and to our constituents to ensure that any professional development activity, whether experienced as a one-hour in-house training session or a week-long conference at the other end of the world, provides us with maximum mileage. It must be fully put to use.

This brings us to a third issue. Smith urges librarians to become informed consumers of continuing education.[14] Addressing a 1995 meeting of the Continuing Education Special Interest Group of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), Mary Biggs, Dean of the Library at Trenton State College, urged her audience always to ask the question, "Was it worth it?" Biggs cited her own cumulative memory "of infuriating wasted days. Of unprepared or inept speakers. Bad handouts. Dreadful transparencies. Tenth-rate multimedia. Outdated notions. Promotional promises not kept. Courses pitched to the wrong level. Clichés, truisms, and greasy doughnuts. And yards and yards of white space in the form of late starting times, early ending times, long lunches, all designed to stretch four or five content hours over a whole day, or four days of content into a whole week."[15]

But, we conference-goers argue, what about the networking, the sharing of ideas and practices, the things we learn from each other between the formal sessions? Biggs noted her concern that we are so often willing to accept the learning that occurs between content sessions as sufficient. She decried "our readiness to admit that the events' supposed focal points are of comparatively little value."[16]

Again, this may sound harsh to those of us who attend or provide continuing education events, but the point is that by being discriminating consumers, and by offering constructive feedback to the providers, we serve as better stewards of our personal and profes-

sional investments. In Biggs's case, she was mindful of the taxpayers footing her bill. For all of us, no matter what type of library, there is a source of funding to whom we owe good stewardship, be it taxpayers, employers, or student tuition. There is another contingent of which we also must be mindful. When you attend a professional conference, what about those left behind to mind the store? Particularly with the increase of team-based organizations, we have an obligation to get maximum mileage from our professional development activities by ensuring the best use of our time away from the workplace.

How do we ensure maximum mileage? In order to do so, all three issues — accelerating our learning curve, transferring the learning back into the workplace, and actively ensuring high quality professional development activities, must be addressed.

## A Learning Experience

I recently experienced first-hand an approach to professional development that I found challenging and effective. The opportunity presented itself in the form of the Training Skills Institute sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Office of Management Services. Prior to the workshop, I received several mailings which began to set the stage, providing not only the usual information about where and when, but what to expect as well. A statement about the Institute's theoretical base, drew from the adult learning theory of David Kolb. Information about what the organizers planned to provide (content, structure, and conducive climate) and what participants were expected to provide (interest, energy, and enthusiasm) also was spelled out.

As I read through the material, I realized that we would not just talk about a theoretical framework; we would incorporate theory into our practice. The presenters would model the theory and the participants then would do the same. It was going to be an opportunity on two levels — learning the content (training skills) and purposefully observing my own learning process.

The first order of business was a request for information. I was asked to respond to a brief survey in which I told the presenters about my current responsibilities, my expectations for the Institute, and needs that may be of particular interest to me. Also I was encouraged to meet with my supervisor prior to the Institute to discuss my goals, performance, and ways the Institute might

apply to my work. By gaining feedback from participants prior to the Institute, the providers were indeed modeling adult learning theory. Content and format could be adjusted to respond to specific learner needs. Encouraging participants to focus on their needs and expectations prior to arrival ensured our active engagement in the process. The Institute itself was a lively blend of activities that provided opportunity for individual reflection, small and large group interaction, timely feedback, and active participation.

Of particular value was a closing discussion on the concept of transfer of training. A flip-chart activity resulted in a grid which delineated responsibilities of learner, trainer, and administrator to ensure that learning is successfully transferred back into the workplace. Stepping back to observe the learning process of the group, I was aware of the excellent timing of this activity, as in reality our next task would be to put our new knowledge into practice.

A final component of the Institute was a follow-up letter to participants mailed after the event. In this letter the presenters shared the results of the Institute evaluations. They also encouraged us to review and continue working on action plans we had designed for ourselves.

As promised, the Institute did model adult learning theory. The knowledge and experience of the participants served as a starting point for learning and discussion. Activities were designed in response to needs expressed by the participants. At the encouragement of the presenters, we had ample opportunity to reflect and experiment with our ideas. We were learning together. We were finding solutions to our real-world problems.

It also was an excellent example of addressing the three overarching issues mentioned earlier. Grounding the workshop in a theoretical base and facilitating participants' reflections on specific needs and expectations did, I believe, accelerate the learning curve. Self-evaluation instruments and readings offered a chance for self-analysis and self-reflection. The opportunity then to take these ideas into small and large groups for discussion and commentary also enhanced the learning curve by providing a context in which we could try out newly formed ideas.

The issue of transfer of training was built into the curriculum of this particular event by virtue of content. Having participants identify goals prior to the event, deliberately discuss goals and

expectations with supervisors and colleagues, and identify ways to incorporate new ideas once back on the job enhanced the opportunity to transfer the training back into the workplace. In my own case, I was able to select and articulate specific strategies to incorporate as goals for the coming year.

As for the third issue, actively ensuring high quality professional development activities, the presenters incorporated a cyclical feedback model which made it easy for participants to provide input and for adjustments to be made as needed. The final summary of participants' evaluations served not only as potentially useful feedback for the providers, but also as an incentive to participants to continue to apply new learning in the workplace.

## Summary

For the moment, and in my estimation for the foreseeable future, librarians will continue to be faced with the challenge of making appropriate selections from the smorgasbord of professional development opportunities. A particularly promising trend is the assigning of responsibility for training and professional development to specific personnel within libraries. Once left to either individual motivation or administrative directive, we now see libraries not only actively encouraging professional development activities, but also working with personnel to ensure that the new learning and ideas actually do impact the organization. Some libraries are able to designate a position for this activity, although seldom full-time. Smith cites a 1991 survey of library continuing education officers in the southeast which found that a large majority of those surveyed devoted less than one-quarter of their time to these activities.[17]

Libraries sometimes charge personnel development committees or teams with facilitating access to professional development opportunities. Admittedly those libraries dedicating personnel and resources to continuing education and professional development are doing so in ways that are limited, and not every library is providing even this level of support. A beginning has been made, however, and happily the numbers continue to grow.

We are fortunate that North Carolina has been a leader in technology as the State Library migrated the North Carolina Information Network (NCIN), now known as the North Carolina Library and Information Network (NCLIN), to the Internet environment.[18] With NCLIN in place, the State Library has made continuing education for public librarians a prime area of emphasis.[19] Workshops and training sessions have already been implemented to respond to a statewide needs assessment conducted during 1995, and more are planned. Public library staff, trustees, and Friends also are eligible for continuing education grants, funded by the North Carolina Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA). The aim of the continuing education grants project is to improve public library services by supporting attendance at continuing education opportunities offered across the country.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Division of Instructional Technologies offers a broad variety of professional development opportunities for school media coordinators in the state. STAR Schools, a federal distance learning initiative, represents a three-year project aimed at integrating technology throughout the curriculum. Staff development delivery sites established in each school system provide access to a variety of satellite networks. The Department of Public Instruction's Video Conferencing Center targets both media coordinators and teachers, and the Staff Development Video Library houses materials that can be checked out. In addition, a number of publications and documents are produced regularly by the Department of Public Instruction, including *Infotech: The Advisory List,* a bimonthly magazine that reviews materials and provides updated information for school librarians.

The North Carolina Library Association also has addressed the issue of continuing professional education by encouraging sections and roundtables to offer programs throughout the year. In an effort to maintain the continuity and benefits of professional activity, these groups particularly encouraged to plan programs for the years between the biennial NCLA conferences. The conferences also offer excellent opportunity for professional development. *North Carolina Libraries*, the official publication of NCLA, provides yet another avenue for professional growth.

It should be noted that these opportunities and challenges apply to all library personnel, not just librarians. The profession has come to realize that professional development opportunities are important for all library workers. In 1990 the first national conference directed toward paraprofessionals was sponsored by the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.[20] Again, North Carolina is fortunate to have the North Carolina Library Paraprofessional Association, an active round table within NCLA. Their vision statement notes that the group is "about promoting the development and recognition of the paraprofessional as an important and vital member of the library workforce."[21] The statement also includes the commitment not only to sponsor programs and training sessions on a regular basis but also to reach a larger number of paraprofessionals in the state by ensuring that each program or session is held in each of the four regions of the state. A fact sheet entitled "Who We Are, What We Do and Where We Are Going" promotes the round table's activities.

We are fortunate, too, that training and development opportunities provided are generally available to personnel from many types of libraries. While some offerings might be very specific and draw participants from only one type of library, many opportunities for us to pursue our professional growth together still exist. The combined perspectives of public, academic, special, and school librarians provide yet another source for our learning. In addition to NCLA, another example of this approach is found in the western part of North Carolina. The Western North Carolina Library Association (WNCLA) is a regional library association which promotes closer cooperation among librarians in 28 western counties. In addition to providing programs of interest to librarians, the group also has established a Paraprofessional round table and recently has published a regional directory of library services, resources, and staff.

In summary, there is indeed a dizzying array of options open to each of us, and it becomes an individual choice. We cannot and should not pursue them all, nor should we throw up our hands in confusion and simply choose randomly. As we select our activities, we can consider them with an eye to their potential for accelerating our learning curve. In addition to taking time to reflect on our expectations prior to an event, we can take a few moments at the close of the event, before we return to the demands of the workplace, to identify specific strategies that we will employ to make use of our new knowledge. And finally, we can carefully choose our activities based on our knowledge of the quality of products generally offered by the provider. When we are unfamiliar with the quality of providers, we can check with colleagues

who may know about them. This strategy is equally applicable when choosing resources for self-study activities. Once the activity is over, we can make the effort to offer genuinely constructive feedback to the providers.

The library continuing education ecology may indeed be fragile, as Smith notes, but I think it may not be endangered, as he suggests.[22] We are large and fragmented, and as such have experienced exponential and somewhat uncontrolled growth in our professional development activities. The growing commitment to continued library education is apparent, however, and gives evidence of our understanding not only of the importance it holds for us as individuals, but the importance it holds for our library organizations and services as well.

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