From Library Student to Library Professional: Smoothing the Transition for the New Librarian

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This project began in the usual way, with ambitions whose height was exceeded only by their naiveté. Fresh out of library school and eager to commit my tenure there to hindsight, I laid my plans. A review of the relevant literature combined with insights from personal experience would produce a thoroughgoing, possibly definitive diagnosis of what ails library education today. I read and pondered, and the list of symptoms grew. Finally, to round things out with a bit of historical background, I examined Samuel Rothstein's article "Why People Really Hate Library Schools," which contains "an anthology of abuse," complaints about library education excerpted from a century of library literature.[1] Then came the horror: *It Has All Been Said Before.* The criticisms I had encountered in my reading and pondering were no more than echoes of dissatisfactions voiced decades ago. It has all been analyzed as well; we know what knowledge and skills library administrators seek in entry-level candidates and how they compare with the abilities of flesh-and-blood library school graduates.[2] We have advice from working librarians, library educators, and library students on what succeeds and what doesn't in current educational practices and suggestions for improvement in the form of two-year M.L.S. programs, internships, on-the-job training, and continuing education.[3] The final word has yet to be uttered, unless it was uttered long ago, and we were too deep in discussion to hear it.

Rather than deliver more blows to a horse whose powers of life are in doubt, I propose something more modest. As a recent arrival in the field, I cannot shed light on advancement and promotion, management style, or the changes of the last quarter century in librarianship. I am an expert on one subject, however: being new on the job. Even with the best of all possible library educations, the beginning librarian is bound to encounter some adjustment problems. What follows, then, is a review of potential trouble areas and "Things I Wish Somebody Had Told Me," gathered from the personal experiences of myself, the friends who bent my ear, and those who have complained in the professional literature. My suggestions are aimed specifically at public service librarians, both new staff members and their supervisors, but they are applicable in a more general way to all librarians.

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Ignorance and the Local Setting

To the new librarian: Everyone expects to feel lost on the first day of work, but not for the weeks or even months that the uncomfortable feeling of ignorance can persist. The primary source of this feeling is unfamiliarity with a particular library, its staff, and its practices. Obviously, library schools cannot tailor their instruction to the circumstances of any individual library, but the general nature of library education can create the impression that all libraries follow standard procedures. Such procedures do exist, but often they are cleverly disguised behind local traditions and idiosyncrasies. Of these, the simplest and most trivial pose as great a threat to successful adjustment as the most complex. Knowledge of the most esoteric reference tools notwithstanding, the librarian who cannot give directions to every classroom, restroom, and copy machine in the building; quote from memory the bus, football, and exam schedules; and perform basic maintenance on a variety of electronic devices will be neither effective nor comfortable at any public service desk.

To the supervisor: Library schools are notoriously long on theory and short on practical detail; the recent graduate may know the history of OCLC, but not how to interpret an OCLC record. The typical newcomer is reluctant to ask

"obvious" questions and will appreciate, rather than resent, a review of the basics. In addition, the new professional needs as thorough an introduction to office routines as a student assistant or support staff member. The inability to locate supplies or fill out a form properly when a patron is waiting can prove more embarrassing and frustrating than a legitimately difficult reference question.

Another infamous shortcoming in initial training is the outdated policy manual. How many newcomers have laboriously acquainted themselves with its procedures and followed them to the letter when no one was available to consult, only to be told later that "we don't do it that way anymore?" Keeping such materials current may appear to be a low-priority activity to the busy veteran who is familiar with all the routines, but the time spent correcting errors and reinstructing the misinformed newcomer will be more costly in the long run.

Finally, tours of other departments and branch libraries are essential, not only in order for the new staff member to be able to advise patrons on holdings and services in those areas, but also as an opportunity to meet colleagues and begin to form working relationships. A formal tour, prefaced by official introductions, usually has better results than a casual invitation to drop by sometime and look around.

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At the Desk

To the new librarian: Library schools recognize the importance of the reference interview, but there is little they can do to simulate the real-world circumstances in which it takes place. Failure by the librarian to interpret a question correctly is as common a cause of patron dissatisfaction as unfamiliarity with the proper sources, yet beginning librarians tend to concentrate their worries and learning efforts only on the latter. The initial question can sound so straightforward that the inexperienced librarian never suspects that it is not the real question. Far from being merely a library school exercise or a token exchange, the reference interview is crucial to successful service, and often requires true mental gymnastics to unravel a patron's thought processes. Everyone has a favorite example; mine concerns a student I once helped with a seemingly routine request to locate materials for a paper topic. When she appeared unable to settle down with the reference tools I recommended and complained of previous unhelpful sessions with other librarians, I became suspicious. Only after close questioning of her library activities for the preceding week did the answer emerge. She had been consulting only the first ten entries in a single reference source. If all ten were not directly relevant to her topic, she concluded that not enough material existed and started over with a new topic. What had begun as an ordinary reference interview eventually revealed a bizarre and, needless to say, unproductive method of doing research.

In addition to the importance and complexity of the reference interview, another factor the new librarian is often unprepared for is the pressure to answer patron questions *immediately.* No classroom drill or scavenger hunt can produce the same effect as the questioner standing there (impatiently) in person. Old knowledge as well as fragile new training tends to dissipate at the sound of drumming fingers; and even a brief hesitation to gather wits can convince the patron that the librarian is at a complete loss. Here the solution lies mostly in psychology. A poised appearance, communicating confidence and the expectation of a reasonable allowance of time to do one's job, will not only calm the patron but will eventually cease to be merely a facade.

To the supervisor: Some supervisors prefer a gradual introduction to desk work: observation sessions followed by pairing up with an experienced librarian, finally leading to solo stints. Others use the sink or swim method beginning on the first day. Either approach can work, and the new librarian nearly always muddles through. But there is good muddling and bad muddling; and what the newcomer craves, and often does not receive, is a chance to discuss and evaluate his or her beginning efforts to help patrons. In my experience, other librarians were eager to tell me about specific sources to answer specific questions, rather like solutions to math problems. But the brain can hold only so many of these, and the chances of encountering precisely the same question again are relatively low. It would have been more helpful to have taken specific questions as material for general discussions of methods and approaches. For example, the beginning librarian may have trouble striking a balance between persistence and flexibility when working on a question. How many dictionaries should one consult

before trying some other method to identify an obscure word? At what point in a difficult search should the patron be told to come back later? How can one's working style be adjusted at busy times to accommodate more questions without seriously shortchanging any individual?[4] Obviously, there is no hard and fast answer to any of these questions, and experienced librarians may consider them to be so much a matter of common sense as to be not worth discussing. But when nearly every question is a new challenge, the beginner needs the assurance that he or she is proceeding appropriately, especially when an answer isn't immediately forthcoming. In an environment where there is seldom only one right way to answer a question it is far more important to develop an attitude of confidence and independence, for such an attitude is conducive to rapid learning and increasingly effective service.

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Bibliographic Instruction

To the new librarian: More and more librarians are expected to do bibliographic instruction and many library schools are attempting to include training for it in their curricula. Despite these efforts, beginning librarians often find bibliographic instruction to be one of their most challenging and stressful activities. Much of the problem lies in improper preparation. When asked to conduct a bibliographic instruction session, the typical beginner devotes most of the preparation time to studying the reference aids to be presented. He or she then enters the classroom armed to the teeth with detail, only to have it evaporate at the first sight of a roomful of bored and skeptical students. What follows is all too often a disorganized and poorly timed recitation, tedious for the students and daunting to the librarian who concludes that even more preparation time will be necessary to do a better job next time. What is needed, of course, is not necessarily more preparation time, but more efficient use of it, beginning with an effort to determine what difficulties a particular group of students might encounter in using a particular library. The information that will help to resolve these difficulties in the time allotted for the class is the only information that needs to be presented. (The obviousness of this advice is exceeded only by the numbers of teachers who ignore or forget it.)

Once the basic content of the class is set, the remaining time can be used to practice delivering it to an audience. Professional musicians practice not merely until they know a piece, but until they know it too well to forget it under pressure. The same should be the goal of teachers, since polished public performance is not a skill that comes naturally or easily to most people. And practicing does not mean a thirty-second review of what one would like to say, but the actual saying of it, aloud, in front of the mirror, in front of the dog and cat, in the car, in the empty classroom, etc. (The best place I found to practice was at the edge of a field of cows. After their steady but absolutely uncomprehending gaze, I was ready for any group of students.) The point of all this practice, which will soon require much less time, is not merely to produce a bibliographic instruction session worthy of attendance, but one that is satisfying and less stressful to the librarian conducting it.

To the supervisor: As in other areas, the best aid a new librarian can have in bibliographic instruction is a chance to observe and discuss the methods used by more experienced librarians. Discussion should cover not only what takes place in class, but beforehand as well. Team preparation and presentation can provide a gentle introduction to the classroom. And if equipment such as an overhead projector or video player is to be used, the new librarian needs time *before* the session to become comfortable operating it; few things impede instruction or undermine the teacher's confidence more than uncooperative audio-visual aids.

When the new librarian is ready for a solo venture into the classroom, the natural tendency for the supervisor is to assign an "easy" session, perhaps a basic introduction to the library for freshmen. In "On-The-Job Training for Instruction Librarians," Marilyn Lutzker points out why such a session may not be so easy.[5] Since encouraging active library use is the primary goal of introductory classes, their "packaging" is at least as impor-

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tant as their content, and beginners often have trouble enough just mastering the latter. A better first class would be a more experienced group interested in a specialized subject area with which the new librarian is familiar. He or she can then concentrate on content, building confidence with a comparatively receptive audience that has already been won over to the library.

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Mentors

To the new librarian: Deanna Roberts describes in "Mentoring and the Academic Library" a mentoring program organized on an experimental level at the University of Georgia Libraries in 1985.[6] Where such formal arrangements exist, they are well worth investigating; but mentoring relationships can also develop on an informal basis to which the term "mentor" may never be applied. Anyone who takes a special interest in a librarian's professional development qualifies as a mentor, and unlike cooks preparing a broth, the more mentors the better. In a series of library field experiences and part-time jobs, I was fortunate enough to acquire several mentors, each of whom provided me with a combination of the best elements of library education and on-the-job experience. Like library educators, they took time to discuss the theory and broader implications of specific practices, a luxury not usually possible during busy day-to-day operations. And the practices under discussion were real and relevant to my position, as opposed to the simulated exercises of library schools. Furthermore, observing my mentors in action was undoubtedly the most important factor in transforming my outlook from that of library student to library professional. One disadvantage of a mentor is that he or she provides only one view, and it is up to the protégé to remember that this view is not necessarily the final word. Here is where having multiple mentors can prove especially useful; exposure to a variety of viewpoints and approaches should help the new librarian develop a balanced perspective. Another potential danger is that of the "manipulative mentor," someone who puts personal needs ahead of what is best for the protégé. Such unhealthy relationships threaten all areas of life, however, and the benefits of a successful mentoring relationship far outweigh the dangers of what could go wrong.

To the supervisor: A mentor can be the best thing that ever happened to a new librarian, and the relationship is not without rewards for the mentor as well, such as personal satisfaction, greater interaction with colleagues, and added incentive to keep abreast of new developments. But mentoring also requires a tremendous time commitment, and not everyone is temperamentally suited to the role of mentor or protégé. All supervisors, whether or not they decide to act as mentors personally, should introduce the newcomer to as many colleagues as possible, encourage participation on joint projects, committees, etc., and promote any other opportunities for mentoring relationships to form and flourish.

The Grapevine

To the new librarian: Informal communication, usually illustrated by a diagram with triangles or squares representing the organization, and arrows pointing in every direction to show the irregular flow of information, may be a phenomenon you thought could never exist outside a management textbook. In reality, it is one of the most important components of the organizational environment, and no newcomer can feel truly at home until he or she has a place on the vine. Almost all libraries have written policies, and most function at least in reference to these policies, but few are able to follow them to the letter. Situations not covered by any rule arise, modifications evolve without being recorded, and individuals interpret formal policies differently. Informal communication explains the crucial translation from what is supposed to happen to what does happen; therefore, individuals who are familiar with both the formal and informal workings of a library are well worth seeking out. Some choose to avoid the grapevine altogether because it unfortunately transmits fallacious rumor just as readily as truth. This is a personal decision, but in my opinion an open mind and a grain of salt are more useful than the purity of ignorance.

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To the supervisor: In the effort to set a good example some supervisors communicate to the new staff member only the ideals rather than the realities of an institution. Although such fine intentions are admirable, much useful informa-

tion is withheld, and the newcomer is made to feel like a child or a perpetual guest in a home where "real talk" is reserved for adult family members. Of course no one wants to create prejudice or engage in malicious gossip, but it is foolish to ignore the human side that is part of every organization. For example, don't just hand your new staff member an organization chart; go over it, explaining how long various individuals have been in their positions, what committees they serve on, what projects and ideas they have originated, etc.—anything that will help provide a sense of context. If problems exist, speak candidly about them. Emphasize that you are expressing an opinion, and encourage the new librarian to listen to other viewpoints. If you are concerned that your charge will not be able to maintain an open mind, consider how much harder that will be if he or she through ignorance blunders into unnecessary trouble.

Evaluating Progress

To the new librarian: Glad to be out of school at last? No more tedious exercises, irrelevant papers, final exams, and best of all, no more grades, right? Well, after a few months you may long for as simple and regular an indicator of progress as a grade. Droughts of feedback characterize the evaluative climate of the real world, and what does come through is often only the negative. There may be praise for individual projects, but unless you are the very best or worst person ever to hold the position, it is unlikely that you will hear frequent remarks about your performance. If you want more evaluation you will have to ask for it, and asking too often may cause your supervisor to wonder whether you have a special reason for feeling insecure. Try to develop and rely upon your own standards; set goals for yourself and think of ways you can reach beyond the basic job requirements. Reviewing these with your supervisor will provide a way to get feedback while making a contribution at the same time.

To the supervisor: Remember that nearly constant evaluation is the hallmark of our educational system, and the new librarian will appreciate a gradual weaning. Communicate your expectations as clearly as possible so that he or she has guidelines against which to measure progress. The newcomer who appears to be meeting no more than the minimum requirements may not lack initiative but may simply be too new to determine what additional work would be most helpful. Spoonfeeding such an individual is neither necessary nor beneficial; instead, describe a need or problem and challenge the new staff member to investigate it and come up with a solution. In the midst of all the activity, however, don't forget to allow the beginning librarian extra time for reflection; trying to absorb too much too quickly seldom has good results.

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A final word to the new librarian: If you continue to feel uncomfortably ignorant longer than you think you should, consider the sources of this feeling. Chances are that the questions you are uncertain about now are entirely different from those that perplexed you a month ago or when you first began. Take a moment to congratulate yourself for mastering so much so far. Your level of comfort will increase, slowly but steadily. And if you ever reach the point of experiencing no moments of uncertainty at all, you have outgrown your job.

References

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3. The literature in these areas is vast, but for representative examples relating to reference work, see Martin H. Sable, "Teaching Reference By the *Smorgasbord* Method," *International Library Review* 16 (July 1984): 271-83; Theresa L. Wesley and Nancy Campbell, "From Desk to Blackboard: A Practitioner's Approach to Teaching Reference," *Southeastern Librarian* 35 (Winter 1985): 109-11; Louise D. Schlesinger, "The View of the Student," in *Education for Professional Librarians*, ed. Herbert S. White, (White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry Publications, Inc., 1986): 237-5-; Edward G. Holley, "Extended Library Education Programs in the United States," *Advances in Librarianship* 1981: 45-58; Richard M. Dougherty and Wendy P. Lougee, "Research Library Residencies: A New Model for Professional Development," *Library Journal* 108 (July 1983): 1322-24; Karen Y. Stabler, "Introductory Training of Academic Reference Librarians: A Survey," *RQ* 26 (Spring 1987): 363-69; Marilyn Lutzker, "On-The-Job Training for Instruction Librarians," *Reference Services Review* 10 (Summer 1982): 63-64; Darlene E. Weingand, "Continuing Education Programs and Activities," in *Education for Professional Librarians*, 223-35.
4. Stabler, 368.
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6. Deanna L. Roberts, "Mentoring in the Academic Library," *College & Research Library News* 47 (February 1986): 117-19.