Integrating New Paraprofessionals into an Old Profession

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Résumé

Nous connaissons les programmes de techniciens en bibliothéconomie depuis quarante ans; nous assistons présentement au développement de programmes similaires dans le domaine archivistique. Comment notre profession réagira-t-elle devant ces initiatives? Cet article passe en revue l'évolution de la formation des techniciens en bibliothéconomie; il décrit les mesures que la profession de bibliothécaire a entreprise afin de pallier à ces problèmes, et enfin recommande l'intégration des techniciens en archivistique à la profession archivistique.

Abstract

Library technicians' programmes have been with us for forty years; we are now seeing the development of similar programmes in the field of archives. How will our profession react to these initiatives? The article reviews the evolution of library technicians' training, describes measures that the library profession has undertaken to alleviate problems, and concludes with recommendations designed to assist the integration of archival technicians into the archival profession.

"How can a library technician catalogue and classify material, without a graduate degree?" "No one without a university degree could ever work on a reference desk!" "I have eight years experience working in this department. I have learnt everything I know on the job. How can a two-year programme teach them what I know? Well they don't even understand how we do things around here. Who are these technicians anyway?" These questions and similar comments reverberated

through Canadian libraries when library technician programmes were first pro-
posed. Librarians, who worried that technicians would become "cheap librarians,"
opposed any formal training for support staff. Library clerks, afraid that their job
advancement and mobility would be hindered, complained about the hiring of tech-
nicians. The development of library technicians' programmes and the integration
of their graduates into libraries has been a long and arduous process. Furthermore,
the availability of trained technicians has had an immense impact on all library
workers. Technicians have enabled librarians to rethink and restructure their pro-
fession. While some librarians relish being released from routine duties, others still
react in fear that their jobs are at risk. Archival technicians' programmes are just
now beginning in Canada. Will archivists react with fear or joy?

Archivists can learn from the mistakes and the successes of the library profession.
They can adopt the necessary structures and standards to use archival technicians
to their full potential, or they can refuse to hire technicians and resist the develop-
ment of these programmes. The choice is there.

Development of Technicians' Programmes

Before examining the development of library technicians training it is useful to
consider the definition of the term. Jean Weihs, a library educator, has said that
technicians are "trained to undertake standard library procedures in those areas
where a university education is not required, but where the complexity of the work
requires more than clerical competence. Technicians work under a librarian's
direction or follow a detailed outline of procedures set down by a librarian. This
means that they can handle most of the routine which makes a library function
effectively and train and supervise clerical staff, student assistants, and eventually
other technicians."[1]

Although the formal training of librarians began in the nineteenth century, library
technician programmes did not start until the 1950s in the United States and the
1960s in Canada. Initially these programmes met with resistance from Canadian
librarians, who opposed formal training for support staff. The impetus for training
originated with administrators of community colleges, who were developing a
variety of new technical programmes and viewed libraries as an ideal market.[2]
With the help of a few supportive librarians, and the Trustees Section of the
Manitoba Library Association, the first one-year programme started in 1962 at the
Manitoba Institute of Technology. The second programme, against the wishes of
area librarians, opened in Vancouver in 1966. In the same year the first two-year
programme began in Thunder Bay. This remote community had had trouble
attracting trained professionals. Librarians in Thunder Bay thus viewed trained
technicians as an asset instead of a threat, and promoted the programme.

The advancement of library technician programmes parallels the development of
the community college system. As provinces converted vocational schools and
technology institutes into community colleges, they established these programmes.
Nova Scotia did not establish a library technician programme until the community
college system was instituted in 1988. Today most libraries recognize the impor-
tance of trained, skilled staff to work at the technician's level. As one librarian

remarked: "There really was a difference between even an inexperienced techni-
cian and a well-trained experienced clerical. I think this difference can be summed
up in the technician's point of view or scope of vision."[3]

Education Standards

Since 1966 the Canadian Library Association has taken an active role in establish-
ing guidelines "to promote excellence in the training and education of library tech-
nicians." Their *Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians* recommend
that programmes be two years in length with forty to fifty per cent academic cours-
es and fifty to sixty per cent technical courses. They describe the course content as
follows:

> Academic courses are directed towards broadening students' general knowl-
> edge and enhancing career development ... All academic studies should stress
> written and oral communication skills.

> The graduate library technician possesses the general technical skills needed to
> work effectively in both automated and manual environments. The library
> technician is trained to handle all formats currently used for storing informa-
> tion.[4]

Technician programmes are based on the practical, stressing the mastering of skills
instead of theory. This pragmatic approach is reflected in the field practice that
should, according to the *Guidelines*, consist of a minimum of twenty-five days.
The purpose of the field work is to reinforce the skills learned in the classroom,
rather than the application of theory.

Instead of recommending courses for the programmes, the *Guidelines* outline the
minimum competencies required of graduates. Examples of minimum competen-
cies in reference work are an ability to:

1. Conduct reference interviews in order to ascertain user needs.

2. Answer basic reference questions using standard reference tools and data-
bases.

3. Recognize and refer to librarians reference questions requiring further exper-
tise.[5]

Differentiating between questions that require a librarian's expertise from ones that
a paraprofessional can answer is a very important part of the technician's educa-
tion.

Ensuring that the courses are relevant is also essential. To this end the *Guidelines*
recommend the establishment of an Advisory Committee comprising representa-
tives from libraries and other employers. "The Advisory Committee provides a
focal point for the information sharing and liaison between the programme director
representing the educational institution and employers of graduates." For provinces
with more than one library technician programme, they recommend the appoint-
ment of a Provincial Advisory Committee to oversee the development of these pro-
grammes in the province.

Affect on Librarianship

The introduction of library technicians into the workforce, coupled with emerging information technology, resulted in a re-evaluation of the role and educational needs of librarians. Traditionally, librarians had been burdened with many clerical or technical duties. Some viewed the elimination of these duties from their job descriptions as liberating, while others resented the assumption that graduates of a two-year community college programme could do the tasks previously assigned to them. Nevertheless, librarians had to delegate the more technical and routine aspects of their work in order to take on the more challenging tasks presented by the demands of the information age and the new technologies contributing to the explosion of information resources.

In 1970, D.D. Sudar pointed out that the "library profession cannot expect fuller recognition from society unless its members re-direct their preoccupation from handling forms to handling ideas. For this they need to be free of the maintenance of the library apparatus which they will have to delegate to junior practitioners, technologists and technicians."[6] In the same year, John Marshall, an Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto School of Library Science, wrote:

> The library profession is going through a crisis of identity. This is related to new demands being made on the profession, the incorporation of whole new areas into the librarian's body of knowledge, new responsibilities for techno-logical advancements, and not least the emergence alongside the librarian of new categories of library workers. Such categories may include the profes-sional specialist from another area of expertise - systems analysis, business administration, social work, adult education. They also include the library technician or LTA. So the librarian, if he is not sure of his own base of knowl-edge, expertise and range of professional action, is threatened as it were from all sides. Many in our profession have, therefore, reacted in fear.[7]

In 1967, five years after the establishment of the first library technician pro-grammes, McGill University expanded its Masters of Library Science from one to two years and eventually librarianship developed as a profession based primarily on theory instead of practice.

Roles and Responsibilities

In 1982, realizing the need for a clear differentiation between the duties of various library workers, the Canadian Library Association (CLA) established a Task Force on the Roles and Responsibilities of Librarians and Library Technicians. Their report has helped to alleviate the confusion over the responsibilities of each. It states that "a fundamental difference between the education of librarians and library technicians is that librarians are taught to understand the relationship of the task at hand, and the significance of librarianship, to the role of the library in soci-ety, while library technicians are taught to understand how tasks fit into an individ-ual library's operation with emphasis on task performance rather than theory."[8] This fundamental difference shapes their distinct abilities and their respective roles.

Acknowledging that overlap may exist between the tasks of a senior library technician and a newly graduated librarian, the report assigns responsibilities accordingly. It categorizes library tasks under four headings: administration; public service; collection development and maintenance; and technical services. Each task is assigned to either the librarian or library technician, or to both, depending on its complexity and the subject knowledge required.

For example, the report distinguishes between the roles and responsibilities of librarians and library technicians in the area of technical services in this way:

> Librarians specialized in technical services are taught the underlying principles of descriptive cataloguing rules, classification schemes, subject heading systems, and their applications to manual and automated procedures in different types of libraries. This training enables librarians to adapt standard schemes/systems for new collections, and develop new approaches when needed.[9]

> Library technicians learn how to apply standard descriptive cataloguing rules to materials that can be catalogued without extended study and interpretation of the rules. They also learn to assign subject headings and classification numbers to materials where an academic knowledge of the subject matter is not required.[10]

Librarians understand the theoretical underpinnings of librarianship. They can adapt and develop standards and systems, while library technicians apply the procedures or rules that they have learned. This difference is significant. Librarians establish policies and procedures; technicians carry them out. Librarians select materials; library technicians acquire them.

Current Situation

The CLA's work has alleviated, but not eliminated, problems. Unfortunately, too much overlap between the tasks of the librarian and the library technician still exists. In 1981, based on a study of four paraprofessional workers in Australia, John Levett warned that "librarianship has the potential to produce considerable conflict in this regard, given the wide range of paraprofessional duties conceded by the LAA [the Library Association of Australia], and the fact that undeniably, many 'professional' librarians operate at the sub-professional level."[11] This potential conflict is now being realized. A recent study of job responsibility and job satisfaction concluded that there is "a major overlap of responsibilities in the area of creating bibliographic access, small but provocative overlaps in the areas of collection development and public services, and a strong division of responsibilities in management-related activities."[12] This overlap is particularly worrisome because it produces dissatisfaction among library workers. The same study revealed that "dissatisfactions stem not only from inequity in pay but also in promotion procedures, job development, and general status. Blurring of responsibilities is an important issue in a hierarchical organization, particularly as such blurring causes dissatisfaction in an environment that is as service-oriented and people-dependent as a library."[13] Studies across the United States are corroborating these results. Canadian studies would probably produce similar findings.

Information Technology

Technological change is exacerbating many of these problems. As automation sim-
plifies many processing functions of the Technical Services Departments of
libraries, trained technicians are mastering many traditionally "professional" tasks.
Cataloguing and Bibliographic Services, once the bastion of the librarian, are now
predominantly staffed by technicians. Librarians now manage, set policy, adapt
cataloguing rules, or supervise. Over the next twenty years technology will have an
even greater impact on the roles and responsibilities of libraries. New automated
technologies are revolutionizing our workforce and restructuring our organizations.
Business reengineering, the new buzzword in our culture, is permeating business,
government, and our libraries. According to the 3 June 1993 *Issues of Canada's
Future*, reengineering will affect the workplace in the following ways:

> The business is a network of teams that interact. Employees commit to the
> team rather than their place in the hierarchy.

> The business breaks down walls between enterprises, creating strategic
> alliances, encouraging "co-opetition."

> Employees and work groups are empowered to plan, make decisions, take
> action.

> The organization is flat and simple. Decisions are made where they have to be
> made.

> Flexibility. Work groups are "modules" that come together for specific pro-
> jects, regroup for others.

> Corporate culture recognizes the independent multi-career professional, and
> rewards competence and accomplishment.

The "gurus" tell us that any organization not reengineered to meet the demands
and challenges of the new society will be doomed to failure.

  So, considering the history of library technicians and the inevitable changes to
our workplace, is the librarians' experience relevant to archivists? Are archival
technicians needed to fill a void between the clerical functions in archives and the
work of archivists? Do archivists perform tasks that could easily be carried out by
trained paraprofessionals? Do archivists have more challenges requiring their
attention? The answer seems obvious. In 1980, in his plenary address to the
Society of American Archivists, Gerald Ham hypothesized that archivists would
have to adopt a proactive approach to managing records.

> We see that the current revolution in information processing is inexorably
> changing our world and our work, pushing us into a new period in archival
> history, a period I call the post-custodial era. Our effectiveness as archivists in
> this new era depends on our ability to alter our past behavior and to fashion
> strategies to cope with both the opportunities and the problems created by this
> revolution.[14]

In a similar vein, David Bearman has suggested that

> To gain respect as information professionals, archivists need to focus their
> knowledge on the selection of archival records, the design of information sys-

tems, including archival information systems, and analysis of the information requirements of archival clients rather than on storing records. To gain respect as management professionals, archivists need to flesh out their tasks as information auditors, developing techniques for information as a resource and for enforcing information accountability.[15]

To adapt Marshall's observations to an archival context, these developments will result in "new demands being made on the profession, the incorporation of new areas into the [archivist's] body of knowledge, and new responsibilities for technological advancements." To meet this challenge "they need to be free of the maintenance of the [archival apparatus] which they will have to delegate to technicians."[16]

What should the archival profession in Canada do to facilitate the integration of archival technicians into the archival profession? Following is a set of recommendations for the Association of Canadian Archivists to consider:

1. The ACA should develop guidelines to distinguish the roles and responsibilities of archivists and archival technicians. Without such guidelines, archival technicians will be hired to perform tasks that require the expertise of an archivist. The guidelines should enable archival technicians as much as archivists to advance in their careers. Archivists should examine each of their duties and ask "Do I need a graduate degree to perform this task well? Could a paraprofessional do this task, thereby freeing me to do something more challenging and more essential?"

2. The ACA should recommend clearly defined pay scales. Pay scales for technicians should start at the top end of the clerical salary category and rise for a senior archival technician to the low end of archivists' salary scale. This type of overlap will reflect the different abilities, skills, and training of each as well as ensure that archival technicians receive appropriate remuneration.

3. The ACA should develop guidelines for the education of archival technicians and their ongoing development and training. The Education Committee of the ACA should establish standards for archival technicians training as well as examine their post-appointment needs. Employers should make a commitment to support archival technicians' attendance at workshops sponsored by the archival community.

4. Archival institutions should develop a team approach to the completion of tasks. Managers of archives could organize these teams around portfolios. For example, technicians could be responsible for accessioning, sorting, and listing files or items, while archivists assume the responsibilities for appraising, arranging, and describing archival fonds. An archives could organize its reference service around functions with archival technicians providing the first line of reference and archivists assisting with questions that require research expertise and/or more detailed knowledge of a complex fonds. In these ways the team approach values both archival technicians and archivists for their different abilities, skills, and knowledge.

There is little doubt that the emergence of new archival technician programmes will have a profound impact on our established profession. The question is whether the impact will be positive or negative. The answer to that question will depend on the actions of our archival associations, our archival institutions, and ourselves.

Notes

*   This article is based on a presentation to the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists held in St. John's, Newfoundland, 24 July 1993.

1   Jean Weihs, "The Library Technician," Loraine Spencer Garry and Carl Garry, eds., *Canadian Libraries in their Changing Environment* (Toronto, 1977), p. 429.

2   Ibid., p. 420.

3   Judith Ruan, "What a Library Technician can do for you - One Library's Experience," *APLA Bulletin* 38 (Spring 1974), p. 6.

4   Canadian Library Association, Task Force on the Professional Review Process for Library Technician Programs in Canada, *Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians* (Canada, 1991), p. 7.

5   Ibid., p. 10.

6   D.D. Sudar, "Education for Librarianship — A Personal View," Allan Campbell and Irene Dawson, eds., *The Library Technician at Work: Theory and Practice*. Proceedings of the Workshop held at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, 8-9 May 1970. (Ottawa, 1970), pp. 19-20.

7   John Marshall, "The Occupational Context," Allan Campbell and Irene Dawson, eds., *The Library Technician at Work : Theory and Practice,*; Proceedings of the Workshop held at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, May 8-9, 1970. (Ottawa, 1970), p. 21.

8   Canadian Library Association, Task Force on Roles and Responsibilities of Librarians and Library Technicians. *Roles and Responsibilities of Librarians and Library Technicians*, p. 6.

9   Ibid., p. 15.

10 Ibid., p. 29.

11 John Levett, "Paraprofessional Workers in Four Fields: a Comparative Study," *The Australian Journal* (May 1991), p. 50.

12 Patricia A. Kreitz and Annegret Ogden, "Job Responsibilities and Job Satisfaction at the University of California Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 51 (July 1990), p. 307.

13 Ibid., p. 309.

14 F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *The American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981), p. 207.

15 David Bearman, "An Indefensible Bastion: Archives as a Repository in the Electronic Age," *Archives & Museums Informatics* (1991), p. 18.

16 Marshall, "The Occupational Context," p. 21.