Communication Skills: The Role of the Library School

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Communication Skills: The Role of the Library School

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The Communication process is the theme of this conference and all the indications are that it is becoming increasingly necessary for the librarian to be an active communicator, au fait with a wide range of communication skills. As society becomes more dependent on, and receptive to, more sophisticated means of storing and disseminating information, so must those responsible for the utilisation of this information, librarians and information scientists, become more ready to facilitate access to information. Information, data, knowledge, whatever we call it, is of no use unless it is being processed by a human mind, and it is our function to get information out of store whenever necessary, and to bring our minds and those of others to bear upon it. Information is one of the few raw materials which there will never be any shortage - it is a resource which we have so far scarcely begun to exploit!

Information is being generated in ever-increasing quantities and the librarian is at the very centre of this process - we have the objective of dealing with these vast outputs of information, of controlling, organising and disseminating them. With a few exceptions, librarians have resolutely avoided facing up to this responsibility - we have been content to remain passive in our own little niches within whatever system we are part of, occasionally moving to a similar niche in another, comparable system. We have been happy by and large to fit in with society's conception of the librarian as an eccentric introvert or a passive creature fit for stamping books and imposing silence, and not much else.

Western society has entered a new, dynamic phase, where computerised techniques of information processing are commonplace, and library services are no exception to this. Where we have gone wrong is in our failure to adapt ourselves to more positive and outgoing techniques, and to be trapped despite a veritable plethora of professional writings within a public and personal image exemplified by the following quotes:

"But that's not man's work"
"You are much too bright to work in a library"
"It's not a job with a future"
"It's a good clean respectable job"
"Librarians are fuddy duddy book archivists in a bibliographic groove"
And, let us not forget the all-time classic:
"Surely you don't need a degree to stamp books" 1

We cannot all be extroverts, but we can develop enthusiasm and social skills, and that is what we are trying to foster at Manchester. If in a working environment we can lighten the atmosphere, and make our users more willing to approach us and to relate to us, then we are beginning to create better conditions for a freer flow of information, and are also beginning to improve the quality of life. We cannot hope to make contact with users, nor can we expect them to want to make contact with us, if we give out signs saying "do not disturb". If we give this impression, then people will not do so, but neither will they have the easy access to information which we can provide, and which we should be committed to providing. Consider for a moment how you might feel in a shop or public building where the staff were rude, surly, unhelpful, truculent and generally uncommunicative. You would be unwilling to go to such an establishment again unless it were absolutely necessary and, by the same token, many potential library users are reluctant to use libraries.

For various reasons, we should be trying to increase library use and library effectiveness, and one of the basic factors in this increase is a heightened commitment to communication on the part of librarians. Some librarians will never acquire such a commitment, but it is becoming more and more necessary for new entrants to the profession to be able to communicate easily and effectively with a wide range of colleagues, and with members of the community. A library service which is disunited cannot serve its community, whether public, academic or special, to maximum potential, if its members are at odds with each other. If there is ineffective communication between the individual librarian and subordinates, peers and superiors, objectives of the organisation will not be clear, and its potential for service will not be maximised. If, for instance, library assistants are not told why they are expected to perform certain tasks (such as routine clerical duties), and how such tasks fit into the work pattern of the organisation, they are bound to feel sceptical about the purpose of these activities. A little justification and explanation goes a long way towards improving attitudes and understanding, also standards of efficiency and service.

Previously, library schools have concentrated heavily within the college setting on the more academic aspects of librarianship, and not so much on the practical side. It used to be thought that students would acquire all
the practical communication skills which they needed during periods of fieldwork, and within peer groups. There was considerable polarization of staff and student positions. Library schools now realise that in a society which is undergoing social change, a society which our trainee librarians will serve and contribute to, there must be a much stronger commitment to communication not only on the part of the students but also, and this especially, on the part of the staff. At Manchester, we have tended to eschew the 'ivory tower' syndrome, realising that the system will always preserve the lecturer/student relationship to some extent, but nevertheless opening channels of communication and consultation, by simply taking a human as well as a professional interest. The library schools are the only medium through which all prospective entrants to the profession pass - it is here that the effort to consolidate and develop skills of communication must be concentrated, because never again will student librarians have such potential for inter-action, for exchange of views, for ranging across the whole spectrum of librarianship within the context of Western society.

For reasons of image, and because of the type of recruit we have had to the profession, there has been a tendency on the part of individual library school students towards introspection. It is depressing, and almost frightening, that many references still use terminology such as "Miss Smith is quiet, thoughtful, introverted; she likes reading and in my opinion is ideally suited to a career in librarianship". Maybe she was ideally suited twenty years ago; she certainly is not now! Students are expected and encouraged to communicate and to participate - we do our best to fill in the human dimension of the organisation and situations concerned by attempting to explain not just how something is done but also why it is done.

Library schools are essentially practical institutions - they must fulfil a pragmatic and dynamic role, and must show initiative and awareness in looking at practical problems and their solutions. Any library school which is doing its job should be creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm and commitment, where training for the profession takes place at a variety of levels, not just in the classroom. Enthusiasm cannot be conjured out of thin air; it must be present in the staff of the library school, who are in a position of considerable power and responsibility. If we are bored and disinterested, then the students will be similarly disenchanted and demoralised. By contrast, if the staff of any library school are not just time-servers, but are enthusiastic professionals; ready to communicate with, to assist and to stimulate students then there is still hope for our profession. Attendance at a library school has tended to be seen as a
formality - it should be seen as something positive and rewarding, a mutually beneficial process for students and staff alike. Given human nature, there will always be a proportion of students, and staff, who are content to remain on the sidelines of the profession, but the more this can be reduced to a less significant minority the better. One cannot help wondering about the motives of such people, but given the flaccid image which our profession has had in the past their presence within the profession is explicable if not exactly cause for jubilation. It should be a commonplace that the schools recruit staff who have a certain degree of involvement and enthusiasm as well as the more formal qualifications, and by the same token it is incumbent upon us to recruit students who have a similar, if less highly attuned, basic interest in the profession and its need to communicate as never before with the community and with other areas of professional activity.

There is an ongoing debate among staff of library schools over the essence of library and information studies and the provision of a comprehensive framework to integrate the various areas of study. At Manchester, the basis of both the undergraduate degree and postgraduate diploma courses can be taken as 'communication studies'. In devising the first CNAA (Council for National Academic Awards) degree, which began in 1970, a paper called Communication of Information was included as a base for the whole course. In the revised syllabus (1975-1980), the opportunity was taken to expand this to a double paper (Communication 1 and Communication 2), which has now evolved into Communication of Information and Documentation of Information. When the CNAA Postgraduate Diploma course was designed, the Communication paper was intended to perform a similar function.

In considering a foundation for library education it is suggested that two major factors are the idea of librarianship that exists among staff and in the profession generally, and the particular inclination of the staff in each institution. The view of librarianship which sustains the communication studies approach is that of librarians as mediators or facilitators of communication, and as managers of people. The essential aim of librarians as facilitators is to bring about a 'productive proximity of information and information seekers'\(^2\). To do this, librarians need particular skills and knowledge, but these are most fruitfully utilised with an understanding of the whole of the communication process to provide a frame of reference.

Another basis for a 'philosophy of librarianship' which links to the above is
a 'study of the sociology of knowledge and social epistemology'.

Communication may also be seen as the key factor in organisations, and this again reinforces the role of communication studies as an integrative base. On the degree course, which is oriented towards the social sciences, this can be represented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication of Information</td>
<td>Information Services</td>
<td>Information Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation of Information</td>
<td>Information Retrieval</td>
<td>Information Retrieval</td>
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<tr>
<td>Library in Society</td>
<td>Functions &amp; Operations</td>
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<td>Sociology</td>
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<td>Options: one of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Studies</td>
<td>years 2 and 3)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Book in Society</td>
<td>Computer Studies</td>
<td>Dissertation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 1: Main areas of degree course

At Manchester, the communication papers had strong staff support in that the original paper was designed and taught in the first instance by team leaders, i.e. senior staff responsible for 'core areas' (Information Retrieval, Information Service, Management). Communication is viewed as an integrative foundation to both the degree and the postgraduate courses. Clearly, the environment here is different from that of institutions where only one or two staff think along these lines.

Given the above premises, the content and approach of Communication (and its linked subject Documentation) in the first year of the degree course is designed as follows (in considerably simplified form):

Communication of Information
- Interpersonal communication.
- Mass communication (inc. non-book media).

Documentation of Information
- Generation of information (inc. research methods and primary publication).
- Utilisation of information.
- Problems of information control.
- Introduction to information services and information retrieval.

(2 lectures + 2 seminar hours per week per student).
The organising principles of the above are:

a. how people (including library staff) communicate face to face
b. how people communicate over time and distance
c. how information is produced
d. how the user can access information
e. problems arising from b, c and d
f. the librarian's attempts to deal with these problems

We examine means of communication in a variety of dimensions, which may be summarised in the following diagram:

Interpersonal Mediated
Dyadic Small Group Public Mass

Fig. 2: Dimensions of communication

The current teaching plan of communication is outlined below. I think it worth itemising, as it is less likely to be known to librarians and some library school staff.

Libraries as sources of information
Importance of communications for society
Systems and models
Effective communication
Interpersonal communication
Language and meaning
Communication in groups and organisation
Report writing
Development of writing and printing
Literacy and reading development
The book trade
Non-book media
Control and censorship
Mass media
Future development of electronic communication systems

Fig. 3: Communications syllabus for BA (Library Studies) Course, Manchester Polytechnic

The content and approach on the postgraduate course is similar, as will be seen presently, although more concentrated because of the considerably reduced timescale (9 weeks for the postgraduate course, as compared with 20
weeks for the degree course). In both instances, the taught syllabus is supplemented by extensive reading lists.

These accounts are of particular courses in specific educational environment. They will not accord with practice in other establishments, and staff in other institutions have their own approaches to the teaching of communication content. By the same token, prospective employers have different expectations of trainee librarians; some will expect an awareness of society and its communications structure, others will place far more emphasis on 'pure' librarianship.

By and large, students and staff find it useful to have a common communications base. Also, a communication approach helps to challenge the expectations common to many students and a number of practising librarians that they are entering on a one-dimensional training for work in a small branch library. Admittedly, this will normally be the working situation for a number of young professionals, but it is hardly sufficient basis in itself for a wide-ranging professional education in library and information studies and the society which these studies support.

It can also be argued that a communication approach to library education offers an occupational strategy to allow us to cope with the restricted job market. A proportion, admittedly small, of students will go into 'information' posts in places other than libraries and information units or into posts in the media. Such a communication-oriented approach will also help us as potentially the most suitable professional group to make a real contribution to dealing with the information explosion. In this context, the policies of the Department of Library and Information Studies at Manchester Polytechnic may be examined more closely. Communication is on the syllabus of all courses operating at present, whether they be full or part-time. Those of us involved in the coverage of communication see students participating in the overall learning process as "fires to be lit, not vessels to be filled", pre-supposing that everyone has a certain amount of interest, enthusiasm and social skill which needs to be stimulated in certain ways. Our view is that the best way to achieve this stimulation of individual involvement in the Department and, by extension, in the profession, is to relinquish as far as possible the teacher/pupil syndrome. Under this arrangement, a set amount of information is to be pumped into the "vessels to be filled" - by contrast, we hope by creating a more interactive atmosphere in which it is possible for a dialogue to ensue to stimulate individual development and information sharing purposes, i.e. "fires to be lit" whereupon the individual can realise
his or her own potential. I hope that I have not given the impression of unstructured development - being an academic as well as a practical institution we have to cover a certain syllabus, to look at particular library-oriented questions. By way of an example, the syllabus for Communication on our Postgraduate course is quoted:

| Small group communication          |
| Knowledge and information         |
| Systems and models                |
| Communication in organisation     |
| Non-verbal communication          |
| Mediated communication            |
| Mass Media                        |
| Control and censorship            |
| Literacy                          |
| The book trade                    |

Fig 4: Communications syllabus for Postgraduate course in Library Studies, Manchester Polytechnic

These topics are covered in consecutive lecture sessions, where the actual lectures provide information about the processes of communication, the systems that compete with and complement the library and provide models for its analysis. Such information may act as the basis for projects, and will certainly provide the material for several seminars.

Seminars, it is thought, consist of people as a group putting together their knowledge, ideas and opinions about a topic in a cooperative effort to learn. They are not intended to be an intellectual battle of wits, nor a mini lecture. As envisaged in this context, they are free discussion sessions open to student direction. Ideally, all members of a seminar group should contribute and interact while discussing a topic, which is the essential task in hand. One of the major objectives of seminars is to extend each individual's range of communication behaviour, and generally they are quite successful in this, particularly at the more mature postgraduate level.

In many institutions, these functions are seen as the responsibility of the "teacher" - in other words, there is a clear delineation of roles into teachers and taught/staff and students. In communications seminars as envisaged here, they are the responsibility of all the members. The role of the member of staff is emphatically not to lead the seminar, nor to direct the discussion, nor even to assess the group. He or she is there primarily
as a resource for information, observations and suggestions, and also to learn as an individual from the general corpus of knowledge and experience which the whole group represents. Seminars, then, are an informal and interactive back-up to the traditional pattern of lectures. In such seminars we are trying to evolve an interface between theory and practice.

It is realised that the subject can present peculiar problems to students who encounter it for the first time, largely because of its interdisciplinary nature, drawing as it does on widely differing academic contexts. However, it is felt that adequate explanation of this phenomenon, resting on the complex structure of society, can go a long way towards bringing together aspects deriving from telecommunications, anthropology, psychology, sociology and management. Other areas such as behaviour, perception, language, thought and meaning are also covered, opening up new fields of experience and patterns of communication. Incidentally, it has been found that people are more ready to make points in lectures, to ask questions, whereas they would previously have been overawed by the apparently omniscient lecturer. In seminars, we cannot help but grade participants into high, medium and low communicators. The first two categories we are not too concerned about - they can look after themselves in discussion in society generally, and sometimes more important, in interviews. High communicators can sometimes be in danger of communicating excessively, of causing an information overload, but it is usually not too difficult for them to tone their performance down when the occasion demands. What is far more difficult is for the low communicator, who tends in any case to be unsure of his or her motivation towards a career in libraries, to step up his or her performance to a degree where we may be sure we are getting through. If we receive no feedback from some individuals in a group environment, we take the time to ask them on a one-to-one basis why this is. Some students take to seminars and discussion as to the manner born, others, despite being told categorically that they are no longer at school and that we want to hear their views, are still reluctant to accept these parameters. Generally, those students who are committed to a career in librarianship accept that it does not just involve attending college for a given number of years, obtaining a degree or a diploma and then disappearing into a cosy little backwater until retirement. They can see that they have the potential to contribute to and to change the profession, and they can see that by discussing topics in seminars they are taking the first steps towards achieving this. They appreciate that in their professional lives, they will have to discuss, to bargain, to persuade, to interact. They will do this in a variety of settings in committees, in staff meetings, in meetings with
local government officers, in talks to the public and to special interest
groups. This is the wider field of experience which we attempt to prepare
out students for. We do this internally, by developing an awareness of
communication theory, and by encouraging students to observe communication
practice. That is the formal side of our educational process. However,
there is another, external, side to our communication activities - we
courage students to participate in professional activities at a range of
levels.

We are constantly aware of the outside world of the profession beyond our
doors - we exist to serve and to add to that profession, and we see ourselves
as a dynamic part of the profession, not as sequestered aesthetes,
inhabitants of the 'groves of Academe' shielded from the pressures of
society. We are part of society, and part of our profession. Despite this
we realise that it would be all too easy for individual students to merge
into the background, to have little or no involvement with professional
affairs and the useful contacts and stimulating exchanges which these can
engender. So, we are aware that there is only so much that can be done
internally - sooner or later we have to think both as a Department and as
individuals, in terms of forging links with the profession, a point to which
I shall return presently.

What we are particularly concerned to facilitate is the transition from
library school student to professional librarian. This, I realise, is not a
rapid process, and has to be achieved under the constraints of the complex
systems of education and society within which we operate. Given that this
is a gradual process, we must do as much as possible to make young
professionals aware, while they are students with us, of communication and
its purposes. We also attempt to set the library in its societal context, to
assess its role vis-a-vis the community, and its internal workings, both
formal and informal. A clear picture of the mass media, and of comparatively
recent developments such as word processing and teletext, is given, in an
attempt to fill out the complex communication patterns which the library is
an integral part of. We hope that if new entrants to the profession have
a wider view of society, and an increased ability and desire to communicate,
they will be strongly motivated to implement effective communication in a
library context, to the mutual benefit of themselves and the community which
they are serving.

We recognise that society has changed significantly in the last twenty years
alone, but our profession seems to have lagged behind these changes. It is now time for the image and attitude of the librarian to alter, both externally and internally, to reflect changes in society and patterns of information provision. In a society which generates vast amounts of information, we are charged with the responsibility of collecting, conserving and disseminating, that information when a need for it is made known. We have always been adept at the first two, but we have still to learn that information is a practical tool, that it is of no use if it is kept in cold storage without any human activity being brought to bear on it, or resulting from it. Our function is to deal with society's information needs to satisfy them whenever they are made known, and with this in mind we should become more aware of what society wants to know and how we can help it achieve this knowledge. Very few librarians now exist in a vacuum - the days of our profession being a retreat for the bookish introvert are numbered if not over - so anything which we can do in the context of professional education to prepare students for this situation must be beneficial. We do students, and the profession as a whole, no favours if we shelter them from reality. We must attempt to make them resilient and resourceful rather than submissive and stultified.

Our responsibility to society, and our interaction with it, are stressed in our teaching patterns and content. We are concerned above all to humanise and to de-mystify the profession, and if an increased commitment to communication can achieve this then so much the better. It is no longer enough for a librarian vaguely to "like books and people" - one has to be dedicated to information and its dissemination, and to making sure that people's, in other words the community's, of society's, needs for that information are ascertained, understood and satisfied. We endeavour, for instance, to increase student awareness of audio-visual materials, to open their eyes to the existence of forms of information packaging in media other than books.

One positive way of involving oneself in the profession, which we advocate very forcibly, is taking an interest in professional associations and participating in their activities. We have close links with the Library Association and its numerous subsidiaries on a national and regional level, and we encourage students not only to attend professional meetings, but also to become involved in committee work or student representatives of Manchester Library School. This does not only give students a voice it also prepares them for involvement in the profession at grass roots and eventually at a much higher level. It cannot be stressed too highly just how valuable
this kind of professional involvement is, and those students who have a realistic and enthusiastic view of the situation respond favourably to it. The less realistic and less committed members of the student body still seem to require a course in which everything is handed to them on a plate, where little or no effort is required on their part, a course which approximates to "All you ever wanted to know about libraries but were afraid to ask". If a library school is performing its function satisfactorily, it should ensure that no entrant to the profession is afraid to ask, also that no member of the community is afraid to ask the products of our educational process for the information they require.

We are now in a position where classroom instruction is to some extent moving away from the formal lecture to approaches involving greater student participation. We are more concerned with promoting methods of enquiry and of criticism than with establishing eternal truths. We are trying to prepare members of the library profession who are able to adapt to changes in society, to tackle new kinds of problems and generally to think for themselves rather than slavishly copy down the views of some oracular figure (such as myself!). One device which we are beginning to use is that of simulation or role-playing. Where this has been tried, the results have been filmed on videotape using the facilities and equipment of the Polytechnic Educational Services, and used as a teaching package. Regrettably perhaps, we have not yet developed this in ordinary seminars. Hopefully we are making a positive contribution to the quality of education, helping to bring awareness of current developments to new members of the profession. What we are trying to do above all is to remove traditional constraints from our curricula and hopefully from the thinking and attitudes of our students.

Under my terms of reference, I have related many of my remarks to what we do at Manchester, but I know that at least some other library schools in Britain are equally committed to practical understanding of communication. It would be interesting to hear how colleagues in library schools elsewhere feel about this.

In fact, proposals have been put forward for a so-called "invisible college" for library school staff. It is very easy to become involved too deeply in one's own administrative problems and procedures; an exchange of ideas with colleagues outside one's own establishment is essential, as so much can be done internally. External ideas are essential to further stimulate teaching procedures, to evaluate the extent to which such studies are essential to a profession such as ours which now concentrates more on the exploitation of
information than on the passive collection and provision of documents. Meetings of interested library school staff are held from time to time, to mutual benefit.

In conclusion, we cannot fail to be affected by the process of change in society, and just as we as individuals will change, so must libraries if we are to develop the community's interest in information, recreation and education. They can no longer be formidable places of silence in which people whisper and tread softly, but must strive to be stimulating centres of the community. The more of our professional librarians who subscribe to this ideal the better, and the logical place for them to acquire their ideals and values is in a positive, forward-looking library school. One can only hope that in the future we get less references for candidates which read "Mr X is of a quiet, retiring disposition, and suffers from nervous strain. Although not suited for the rigours of an academic career, he is very fond of books and eminently suited to a career in librarianship", and by contrast more which run as follows, "Ms Y has approached her duties with enthusiasm, intelligence and confidence. She is industrious and efficient, and I am highly satisfied with the accuracy of her work. She is a person of strong personality and a pleasant disposition. She gets on well with colleagues and with members of the public". (Both genuine examples)

The accelerating change in our image and society's expectations of us will ensure that this happens - commitment such as ours to increased communication at all levels will ensure that it happens even more quickly to the benefit of society and of the profession.

REFERENCES:
2 STONE, C.W. The library function re-defined. Library Trends, Oct 1967: p.185