2012

Acquisitions Archaeology -- Professional Ethics

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The pros won that, but the cons had made a good run. If there had been a betting line, they’d have beaten the spread. For an “information school” class, I thought these students had come pretty close to discussing what actually goes on in libraries. This runs counter to what’s a common complaint of today’s jobholders about new librarians, that they have a weak grasp of the “real world” of libraries. This group, it seemed to me, once out there in the real world, wouldn’t be completely in the woods when the time came to jointly assess a journals package, or an e-book deal, or a database offer, not, at least, lost in the surrounding group dynamics.

Following a break it was my turn, and after the debate I tried to make the point that consensus aren’t only and always about getting a good price. A group of libraries with money in hand can influence vendor development priorities. This kind of dynamic can produce winners all around — for the vendor, new business and a new service that can be brought to other libraries; for the libraries, a new way to stretch the budget or to gain efficiencies that hadn’t before been possible. Libraries and vendors, when this occurs, can help each other grow. That seemed a new point of view, contrary to what they’d heard in other classes. “We thought,” one student said, “that vendors all were evil.” The class I was visiting was called “Managing Vendor Relations,” but evidently other courses took a less blandly benign view of what vendors are about.

I suppose there is evil in the world of library vendors, true enough; but so far as I can see, no more so than in any other walk of life. Part of my assignment for the day, in fact, was to talk about how a student in their chair might end up working as a vendor one day, with my own case as case in point, how I came to move from librarian to the other side, a change that had never been in my plans. It was all harmless enough. I’d been a reference librarian, after a few years needed a change of scenery, and the new job I found happened to be with a small book vendor, located nearby.

A few slides helped tell the story. Some were meant to illustrate change over the years since I’d made that switch, less any particular change than the degree of it I’d seen in libraries, and that they could certainly expect to see over their own careers. One slide showed the deep forest green of a run of H.W. Wilson’s Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature, each spine nearly the width of a catalog card, a staple if ever there was one to librarians in the early 1980s, a “reference tool” I’d learned about in library school and must have put to use easily a thousand times for reference questions over my several years behind that desk. I am sure that even today, through muscle memory alone, I could walk a patron to the Reference shelves, remove two or three of those sturdy volumes that opened so flatly onto an index table, flip through the fine pages — thin as a membrane, almost translucent — and within minutes have a nice list of magazine articles ready on nearly any subject a patron could raise. Where would we have been without the Reader’s Guide?

Another show of hands. Who had used the Reader’s Guide? The students were young, but I figured a few of them must somehow, somewhere have encountered the Reader’s Guide. We could have a shared salute to an artifact that in its day had done good service. But there were no hands. Some of you must at least know of the Reader’s Guide? No, no one had heard of it, not the students, not even the professor. If this was a lesson about change, it was a lesson most of all for me — whose library training was apparently closer to the age of Melvil Dewey than to the experience of this classroom in 2012.

I told the students they were fortunate their professor gave them some exposure to the business side of libraries, since one way or another each of them would need to reckon with it. All I’d learned about in library school were things like — and searching for the most arcane piece of knowledge I could recall — things like, my memory served up, what a main entry was. They laughed. The class actually knew what a main entry was. Another surprise. And a connection, although not where I’d have thought to find one. After class, one of the students walked up for a chat. The lesson about change must have gotten through to her too, since she said to me, referring to those Reader’s Guide days, “It seems like a much simpler time,” and what could I do but agree? 🧵

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**Vendor Library Relations**

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an action of our own that we think someone else might have avoided.4 Such a shifting rationalization of personally uncodified “ethics” seems a potential danger in day-to-day practice and, therefore, a reasonable call for writing a professional code of ethics. But this possibility is dismissed with the assertion that it is not possible “to write a standard, universally applicable code of ethics.” 5

The third and final response to Dean’s proposed code comes from a vendor perspective. In this response, it is observed that ethical principles are actually simple but their application in day-to-day situations is complex.6 This may be true, but is this not how we would expect ethics to function, simply defined but broadly applied? And further confounding this particular objection to the creation of a professional code is the statement that “ethics refers not to moral issues of right and wrong, but rather to acceptable professional conduct.” 7 This is simply not the case, at least in the technical sense. While the practical goal of a code of ethics for acquisitions librarians is acceptable professional conduct, such a code is derived precisely from the study of moral issues of right and wrong. An ethics of professional conduct cannot exist in moral vacuum, nor would we want it to. To state that the quest for an ethical code is separate from the morality of right and wrong is misleading. Whether specifically discussing the principles of conduct governing the collective of acquisitions librarians or more generally discussing the guiding philosophy we presumably share, are we not always mindful (and frequently concerned) about right and wrong action in our professional conduct?

The guiding principles that developed out of this ongoing conversation remain critical to our mission as a profession. But the premise that we can function as ethical professionals without an ethical grounding as a profession is nonsense. It is alarming that just a little more than a year after this debate was published, the profession ended up with a formal “statement” rather than a “code,” and was given “principles and standards” rather than “ethics.” While the “Statement” has become our de facto code of ethics, it lacks the courageousness and moral authority of the latter. Dean bravely put forth the groundwork for a true code of ethics, but the profession failed in the end to convert it to a real ethical stand.

In a world shaped by recent ethical lapses that collapsed the global economy, we (individually and collectively) cannot shy away from the moral dimension of our work nor, by extension, the ethical considerations of our profession. In the emergent business, information, and educational environment in which we now exist, the time has come to embrace ethics. We must work together to find those universals that make our discourse and practice possible. 🦊