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Venturing from the “Back Room”: Do Technical Services Librarians Have a Role in Information Literacy?

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Abstract

Catalogers, electronic resources librarians, and acquisitions librarians spend a lot of their time in the “back room” of their library. Yet even as their roles expand to include participation in innovative library initiatives like institutional repositories, shared print analysis, and digital collections, they are not often consulted on new user-instruction activities like enhancing the information literacy (IL) programs for their library community. Information literacy to advance student learning is now emphasized by many accrediting agencies, making it one of the hottest topics in public services today. There are endless library conferences, workshops, and poster sessions devoted to its meaning, methods and assessment. Is there any connection between Technical Services and Information Literacy? Do technical services professionals have a role at their library for improving information literacy within their user community? Can they have something to contribute to the discussion? This paper proposes that these “back room” librarians do have a place in IL efforts and should be included in the conversation. Suggestions include reasons to collaborate on IL with public service colleagues and methods of active learning to use in one-shot sessions. Additionally, the paper highlights ways to relate professional roles to IL initiatives, demonstrates how to make time for participation in these initiatives, and provides ideas for staying on top of trending IL topics.

Introduction

University of San Diego (USD), a medium-sized private institution, offers academic tenure to librarians in Copley Library. Tenure requirements include active participation in the University’s mission to pursue and advance academic excellence. Within these requirements, the library faculty defines the primary role of Copley’s librarians as key players in improving student learning. As the University reviews core requirements for students and responds to the recent round of institutional accreditation, one key focus for improving student learning includes an emphasis on information literacy. The library faculty expects participation in the University’s information literacy efforts from all the librarians, including the technical services librarians. With three tenure-track librarians in the Copley Library’s Technical Services Department, discovering and defining their roles in the Library’s information literacy programs and emerging from the “back room” to participate were critical aspects of their professional service.

Back Room Mentality and Its Perils

Is there really a back room mentality associated with technical services librarians in academic libraries? This mentality suggests that technical services librarians, those in cataloging, acquisitions, serials, and the like, prefer to avoid participation in public service. Numerous references in library literature over the past 25 years mention the term “back room” in conjunction with technical services librarians and their activities. In 1988, technical services librarians in the back room were lauded (Cimbala, 1988) for their efforts to develop the first online catalogs for libraries. Later on, the demise of technical services librarians’ roles seemed imminent (Intner, 1993) if they did not venture out from the back room. Unlike their expected back room roles (Folsom, 2000), these new endeavors required the technical services librarian to embrace ambiguity associated with absorbing public services activities into their work efforts. Conversely, arguments about the actual existence of the back room (Banush, 2009) reinforced that the idea is real within libraries even if the behavior is not.

Sometimes this mentality perpetuates even within the department. How can this be? With the change in technical services roles over the past 20 years due to technological advances and economic pressures on libraries, priorities were rearranged in the typical academic library. Many traditional technical services librarians experienced shifting of their ordering and cataloging responsibilities to more administrative work, like tracking budgets, or even public service oriented work, like manning the reference desk or performing collection development. Simultaneously, many of their previous departmental activities were delegated to skilled staff. It is possible that these staff members are now in the same position as technical services librarians from 10 or 20 years ago: thinking mainly within the walls of the library and the organizational chart. They may see their roles as back room activities with only tangential connection to the user. Despite their skill in taking on high-level tasks, this section of the library workforce needs positive and frequent reinforcement that we are all now part of the user's library activities, which often happen virtually anyway. This shift in mentality will allow all technical services staff to consider work and workflow in terms of end-result for the user instead of process.

Back room ideas are likely nonsense nowadays to academic library administration. The same global events that affected technical services, like technological advances or the economic downturn a few years ago, often resulted in cuts to staff and materials. The staff cuts in particular required most library administrators to rethink their labor distribution to cover vacancies in user services. Many administrators began to map over levels of professional talent in technical services to services in the public view.

Public services librarians may have more difficulty absorbing how their technical services peers can and are transitioning into their arena. Although technical services professionals are sought out for expertise in making electronic packages and print materials continue to appear and function, they may be less likely to be seen as knowledgeable cohorts in the process of instruction.

Nevertheless, the public services librarians are a critical component of their counterpart's success, and open dialogue, training opportunities, and inclusion of all library professionals in discussion about these activities are necessary. In fact, professional organizations and events that are typically considered public service in nature are beginning to witness an advent in these blended interests. For example, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), typically considered reference/public service in nature by many technical services practitioners, recently began an ACRL Technical Services Working Group that will meet for the first time at the 2014 ALA Mid-Winter Conference.

Why should technical services librarians reconsider perpetuating this back room mentality when they already have plenty to do in the back room? Looking back to 1986, Joan Betchel (1986) described her model of library service "as a more powerful alternative to the images of librarianship already available or proposed," and she "suggest[ed] that we begin to think...of ourselves as mediators of and participants in the conversations of the world." Technical services librarians need to become part of the academic conversation about the future direction of the library and its services. Without their input, this discussion will minimize their relevance and contribution to the outcome. Even more persuasive, particularly with university-wide initiatives like information literacy, the outcome has looming importance not just for academic libraries but for their associated academic institutions as well.

Relating IL to Our Roles in Technical Services

Many librarians in technical services have been involved in some form of reference work for years. As mentioned before, often these librarians are already doing more than a traditional technical services job description demands for their position. Simultaneously, they may be shedding the departmental tasks that are no longer as necessary as before. Increasingly, technical services departments are not required to be so focused on the number of books added

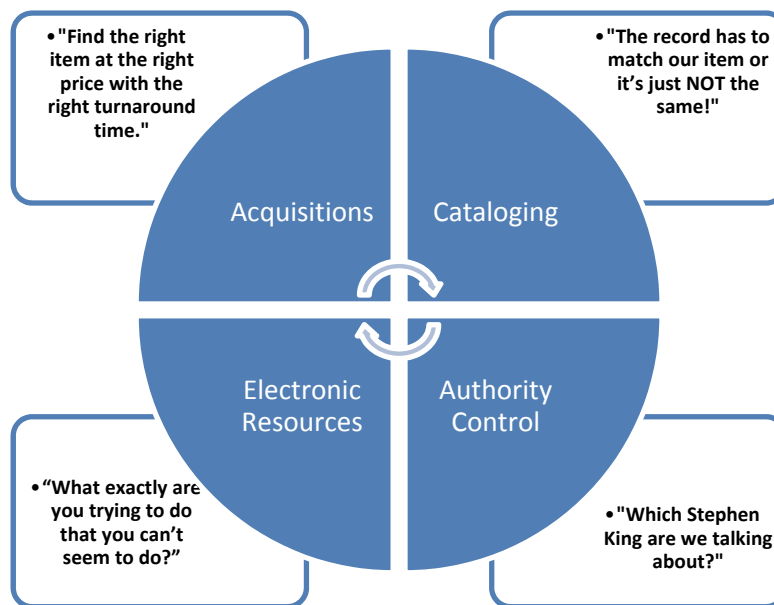


Figure 1. Using Technical Services' Existing Expertise

each year. Departmental statistics are fading in importance to user-centered support. By entering this emphasis on the user through initiatives like information literacy, the department continues to use expertise already developed in understanding what is important about library resources (Figure 1). At the very least, technical services librarians and staff can use their expertise to evaluate workflow in the department that can impact new library initiatives like information literacy and then redirect resources in the most effective manner to support these initiatives.

Information literacy programs affect use of the resources that technical services librarians subscribe to, process, and catalog. It is important to know what users' information needs are and to be able to reflect these needs through library resources. Technical services librarians can determine and affect how patrons are searching for information and how well they succeed in finding it. By understanding the library's approach to information literacy, technical services librarians can also measure collection development efforts to align them with trends and successes in information literacy.

In a more personalized way, as participants in the annual Charleston Library Conference, technical services practitioners are surrounded by the key players in the development and distribution of

products to support information literacy and research. This new perspective, a role beyond acquisitions and resource access, allows the practitioner to be more effective in vendor and consortial negotiations and in discussions with peers, especially during events like Charleston. They can be asking the other questions their university needs to know, like "what is the vendor or consortium doing to support information literacy through their product?" or, "how can these efforts best be promoted back home in the library?"

What Is IL and Why Should We Care?

On September 26, 2012, the Copley Library Information Literacy Committee created a definition of information literacy that would help guide all librarians in Copley Library in their instruction sessions, workshops, and student consultations. According to this definition, "an information literate student recognizes when information is needed and has the ability to locate, evaluate, and use it in an ethical manner."

At a broader level, ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education are currently being revised by a Task Force chosen by the ACRL Board of Directors. The Task Force should have the revised edition completed by June 2014. Recently, they offered open forums

where librarians could learn more about the process of the revision and most importantly, share their input. The open forum recordings are available for free on their web site (http://acrl.ala.org/ilstandards/?page_id=21). During this revision period, it is an important time for all academic librarians to learn more about IL and get involved in this development.

Similarly, USD is revising the Core Curriculum for undergraduates and plans to include information literacy as a measurable objective. Like understanding the ACRL IL Competency Standards revisions, Copley Library technical services librarians must be cognizant of IL and contribute ideas that will help USD's student population become information literate.

Lastly, it is important for academic librarians to stay involved with the accreditation process within their region. Under recommendation from the latest Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation process, Copley librarians participated with other faculty to conduct an extensive study on information literacy. This effort was meant to help faculty develop measurable IL learning outcomes. Elsewhere on campus, the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) consulted the Education Librarian during planning for a new online Masters of Education program. This librarian assisted SOLES with the WASC report review of library resources available for the prospective M.Ed. students. She met with technical services librarians to make sure she had all the information she needed regarding current online subscriptions and other available library resources crucial for the new online Master's program. The technical services librarians supplied the information she needed and created an open dialogue for continuing library assistance with the SOLES program.

Learning the IL Vocabulary and Concepts

Information literacy vocabulary and concepts cannot be absorbed overnight. There are always new and innovative ideas when incorporating them into workshops and student consultations. A wide array of active learning techniques can be

used during instruction sessions or workshops that will engage students in the process.

To tackle IL in the classroom, a few concepts are fundamental in making sure students comprehend what a librarian is trying to convey. For example, the ABCD method in IL is an acronym for a process that creates an expected learning outcome (ELO) for any form of classroom instruction. Each letter represents a different component of the learning outcome. "A" is the audience or the learner that the librarian will be instructing. 'B' is the behavior in which the learner can demonstrate that they learned something. 'C' is the condition or situation in which the learner will be able to incorporate this new skill. Lastly, 'D' is the degree or standard to which the learner will need to accomplish this task. By combining the four letters/components, the process creates consistent ELO's that librarians can use to build various lesson plans.

Active learning activities are highly effective instruction tools for a classroom instruction session or workshop. These methods use many innovative ways to engage the audience. One technique, known as the Cephalonian Method, was developed in 2002 by two Cardiff University librarians, Linda Davies and Nigel Morgan, for a library orientation. They adopted the idea from a tourist trade activity in Cephalonia, Greece. Tour guides used this technique to keep their tourists engaged and to create more curiosity for the island. The method encourages user interaction by having prewritten questions on colored notecards or post-it notes to prompt and manage the flow of questions during the instruction session. The instructor distributes the cards to students at the beginning of the session and then asks for the student with a particular card color or other mark to pose the question. For example, pink cards can focus on questions regarding basic concepts, while green notecards can be questions based on research methods and strategies, and yellow notecards can be questions on implementation and citation formats. Depending on the structure of the course, the instructor can label each card with a number so that it can flow a specific way, or the instructor may ask a student with a specific colored notecard to ask a question.

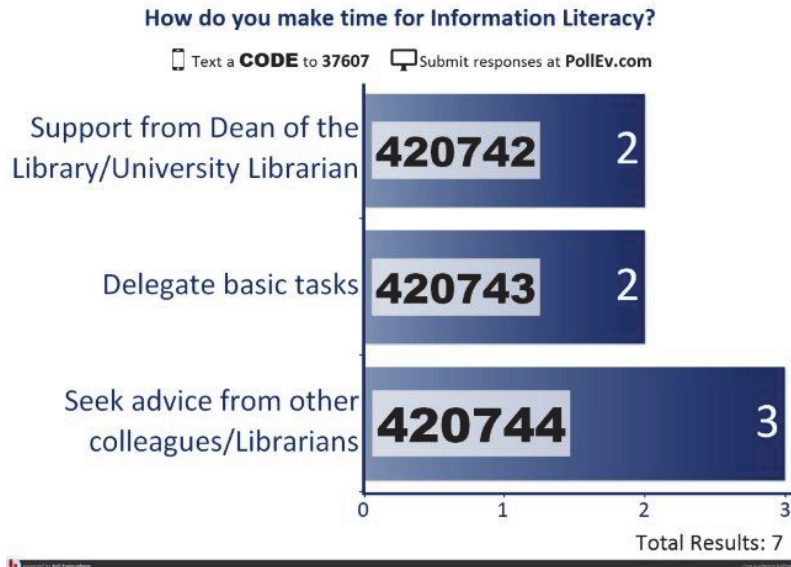


Figure 2. Poll Everywhere

Poll Everywhere is another engaging tool for gauging student understanding of topics. Using Poll Everywhere, the instructor can create a poll asking students a specific question, which can be multiple choice or open ended. The questions are answered with a text message (Figure 2).

Additionally, an application may be downloaded within Microsoft Office PowerPoint, and the poll can be embedded in the PowerPoint. There are pros and cons to using Poll Everywhere with students. An environmental scan of the student population is necessary when choosing a poll for the classroom. With an open-ended poll, some answers may be thoughtful and insightful, while others may be inappropriate. Multiple-choice polls are excellent when gauging students' interests in what they would like to learn or need to learn during the session.

Finding Time and Staying on Top of IL

There are many ways to stay updated with the latest IL trends. Listservs, webinars, workshops, and online forums are excellent ways to stay updated without leaving the office. Listservs and online forums are usually free of cost, whereas webinars and workshops may charge a small fee. INFOLIT and the Information Literacy Instruction Discussion listserv (ILI-L) are a couple useful listservs that offer wonderful tips and ideas for instructions and workshops. IL workshops are frequently offered by different organizations, such

as ACRL and California Academic and Research Libraries Association (CARL) Other programs with IL coverage include events like the recent Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) open e-forum entitled "Technical Services Librarians with Public Service Responsibilities: How Do We Make This Work?"

Assessment in IL

To be successfully assessed, information literacy instruction requires preparation of measurable goals, an exercise already familiar to technical services departments. As a first step, technical services librarians need to find out which information literacy assessment tools are currently being used by their library. And while they need to be on the same page as these efforts, their peers may find that their new perspectives will help develop existing tools into something even more meaningful. Examples of tools used in information literacy assessment include: statistics, pre and posttests, 1-minute post-session papers, project rubrics, e-portfolios, and even web sites that offer pay-per-student information literacy testing products, like Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS) and iSkills. The library or activity may also indicate which tool to use depending on the amount of material to be covered. For example, using a posttest for a one-shot session in a classroom makes much more sense than a project

rubric. On the other hand, if the librarian works with the faculty member to incorporate information literacy for the duration of their course, a project rubric may capture student understanding in the most efficient and consistent way. The ubiquitous survey is less often a part of information literacy assessment because it has a tendency to gauge instructor effectiveness without providing comprehensive feedback on what the user actually learned.

Final Thoughts

It is time for technical services librarians to venture from a real or imagined back room and join the talk on information literacy, a critical topic

for academic libraries. Their expertise can be aligned with the needs of information literacy instruction and assessment. Technical services' perspectives on the discussion, the documentation, and the tools of the library's information literacy efforts can provide significant benefits for all involved. These practitioners are typically the library's connection with the vendors and consortia producing research products and platforms. Additionally, they have intimate knowledge of workflow in their own department that may impact the library's efforts in information literacy. To be relevant partners in the future of the academic library, technical services librarians need to become part of the information literacy academic conversation.

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