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Empowering Information Literacy and Continuing Professional Development of Librarians: New Paradigms for Learning

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Abstract. Information professionals play a key role in facilitating and advocating the development of information literacy in educational, organizational and everyday life contexts. However, their information literacy continuing professional needs have not attracted sufficient attention in research. This qualitative study explores information professionals' perspectives of information literacy within their working practices. The paper reports on the preliminary findings of interviews conducted with seventeen professional and non-professional librarians with experience of working in academic, public and special libraries. Librarians' definitions of information literacy highlighted a weak connection between information literacy development needs and everyday working context, when not directly involving information services to library users. However, information literacy and digital literacy were perceived as interconnected competencies, with the latter requiring ongoing development. Participants highlighted examples of blockage to their overall continuing professional development (e.g. management style, lack of resources) which emphasize the need for expanding online professional educational opportunities and promoting a culture of sharing and openness in the library profession.

Keywords: Librarians, continuing professional development, information literacy, digital literacy, online learning.

1 Introduction

Information literacy (IL) is linked to the development of essential survival skills in the 21st century, which include critical thinking, communication, problem solving, creativity and the ability to continue learning throughout life. The Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals in the U.K. has defined information literacy as "knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner." This definition implies several interconnected competencies which require not only information seeking skills, but also the ability to synthesize, manage, use and disseminate information [1] within an increasingly changing and technologically growing information environment.

The development of IL competences among information professionals is directly linked to their role as “custodians of the highest standards of intelligent information use” [2]. They should act as information seeking experts and information literacy mediators [and educators] for users [3] to help them achieve higher objectives. The LLUK National Occupational Standards for Library, Archives and Information Services provide a framework of the skills required by staff, emphasising the importance of engaging with customers to develop their own IL skills, helping them to “critically appraise various types of information, to understand its significance, make inferences and deductions, and evaluate its reliability for decision making” [4]. The information literate librarian should have expert knowledge to be in a position to assist and direct users to become more competent and confident in their own abilities. A professional dimension of information literacy also requires continuing professional development (CPD), i.e. the “ability to participate in the development of one’s profession and the ability to continuously gather information in one’s professional field, ability to develop one’s tasks and continually search for data, information and knowledge to fulfill these tasks” [5].

2 Rationale and Review of the Literature

The bulk of IL research has concentrated on the extent of librarians’ involvement in the provision of IL and less on their own IL CPD needs in the context of their working practices. Hedman argued that “ironically, against the background of the plethora of user studies in LIS, librarians’ own professional information seeking is still partially unexplored” [2]. Womack [6] explored the orientation and training process of new business librarians and found that responding to the changing information needs of users requires active investigation on the part of the librarian that goes beyond initial training. In a study conducted by researchers at the University of Gothenburg and the University of Borås, it was concluded that although information seeking is essential in the library profession, librarians were never trained to stay current [7].

In addition, the 'Googling' phenomenon challenges the traditional skills of librarians as information providers and the role of library and information service provision in general. Young information users, the so called ‘Digital Generation,’ prefer using the most time-saving and convenient methods of information seeking and are over-reliant on Web search engines [8]. Recent research has found that some of these behavioural characteristics may be prominent even amongst librarians [9]. It is also stipulated that the Digital Generation uses technology intuitively, is comfortable with communicating online, works well in teams, multitasks with ease and values life-long learning. These characteristics may offer novel possibilities for engaging in less conventional activities for upgrading competences and skills.

There are numerous recent studies that have examined the CPD of library professionals in different contexts. However, these lack particular emphasis on IL. This is a competency that underpins all areas of information and library work such as collection development, circulation, promotion of information services, reference services, IL user education, and it is therefore imperative that librarians

upgrade/actively expand their knowledge and skills to maintain the quality of their services in the contemporary library workplace.

3 Methodology

This research study examined views/attitudes, current practice and barriers towards IL CPD of library staff working at (self-perceived) professional and non-professional positions. The research used an interpretative research approach which aimed to understand the research themes from the point of view of librarians and via the meanings they assigned to them within their work environment and surrounding context. The participants of this study were recruited by means of convenience sampling with the majority of them drawn from a Scottish university library school alumni list and they all held a postgraduate degree in a related study area. The research aimed to gain insight into a range of perspectives and for this reason participants with different lengths of library experience and age demographics were recruited. Although this study was by no means representative of these different categories, it may constitute a basis for further quantitative exploration in follow-up research.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews (face-to-face or remote) with seventeen librarians between March – July 2012¹. The interviews were based on mostly open ended directional and other demographic questions (e.g. age, work experience). The average interview lasted approximately sixty minutes.

For the purposes of analysis, all interviewees were transcribed verbatim and were assigned a unique participant code (e.g. P.1, P2). The interviews were manually analysed following the constant comparison method [10]. An initial axial coding scheme was created based on CILIP's IL model [1]. Thus coding themes addressed not only the process of information searching but also ethics, communicating and managing information, examined via the lenses of participants' needs for further development and the barriers experienced in the process. This paper reports on the preliminary findings only.

4 Results

A total of 17 librarians took part in the research, 14 of whom were female and only 3 male. Most of them (n=10) held professional level jobs (n=10) and belonged to the Digital Generation (considered only those born in the year 1980 and after) (n=10). The participants worked in public (n=7), academic (n=6) and special libraries (n=4) and had different lengths of library experience (<2 years, n=3, 2 – 4 years, n=4, 5-7 years, n=2 and >7 years, n=8).

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the continuous support of the Robert Gordon University during the collection and initial analysis phase of the research project, the invaluable contributions of the research participants and the feedback of the anonymous reviewers.

4.1 Information Literacy Definitions and Professional Development Needs

Participants emphasized that a single encompassing definition of IL would not be meaningful unless it was developed within a very particular context (e.g. the type of library and the nature of the particular work role). Thus, IL was described as a “very broad” term (P8, P11) with its meaning changing “from meeting to meeting and job to job” and “for different people” (P11).

The majority of the professional librarians interviewed, touched upon, almost holistically, several aspects/layers of IL which addressed recognising information needs, selection of appropriate sources, locating information, critical evaluation, use, synthesis, ethics and communication. However, in participants’ verbalizations, IL had meaning for teaching or advising others and their accounts rarely addressed activities beyond an instructional or reference service role. For example, one librarian defined it as “being able to accompany *the students* in using their resources properly, ethically and wisely in terms of which ones to choose from” (P3); another participant thought of it “in practical terms, whether *the users of the library* are confident and able to search on the site and find what they are looking for” (P12). Others could not find a connection with it at all because, for instance, their job was in a “background department” and they were “not involved with the students” (P2).

Interviewees were overall confident about their information searching skills and felt that their current knowledge and experience were sufficient to cover their needs at work. Only a few librarians mentioned the value of CPD in terms of upgrading their own skills, yet again, these were mainly in the context of demonstration/instruction purposes (P11; P16). For example, a Digital Generation participant highlighted the value of having the opportunity to attend a course on advanced Google searching for the purpose of teaching end-users (P16). “Involved searches” were generally ignored as they are “not for the workplace” because of the limited time available (P12).

On the other hand, librarians mentioned the need for training on the use of a range of technological tools (e.g. iPads and iPhones), software (e.g. image manipulation tools such as Gimp) and experimenting with QR codes. Digital literacy is an emerging concept which refers to the ability to “use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information requiring both cognitive and technical skills” [11]. Except for one librarian who saw digital literacy related to technical, technology based skills and information literacy connected to critical evaluation (P7), most librarians perceived information and digital literacy (DIL) “as the same” (P12) or conceptualized them as “almost together given that most of the information these days is in a digital format” (P16). Digital literacy was also described as a continuing learning ability sharing many of the characteristics of information literacy, i.e. encompassing “everything that you can do in an electronic environment, from awareness of “newer advances in websites” to the “knowledge of how to go about your basic searches to the more advanced, actively seeking knowledge” (P8). Indeed, according to the European Parliament Recommendations, digital competence is one of the key skills for Lifelong Learning, encompassing the ability to use tools to produce, present and understand complex information as well as the ability to access, search and use Internet-based services and Information Society Technology to support critical thinking, creativity, and innovation [12].

4.2 Support for Continuing Professional Development

Participants who held non-professional positions described a working environment involving a range of tasks that required DIL skills which often transcended the prescribed remits of their formal roles. These tasks varied from administration of day-to-day business (e.g. stock reports, budgets, book processing and classifying, managing records in the institutional repository) to dealing with user enquiries and working across different branches in collaboration and partnership work, participating in the delivery of training courses, writing library blogs and creating reading groups.

However, only two of the non-professional librarians had been involved in more professional activities (P6; P3). The other participants experienced lack of opportunities for extending their portfolio of involvement beyond standard expectations, and described a working environment which was far from ideal, affording few opportunities for career development or progression (P4). Training was less person-oriented and more based on prescribed roles, “for the person in the post as opposed to for the person generally” (P1). As one of the participants put it: “...they are very particular about you staying within your very prescribed position and not going outwith that whatsoever ...they don’t do very much to keep you there or add value to you” (P2).

Considering that participants held postgraduate academic qualifications and that “most library assistants will probably come in to the library with more experience than their job requires” (P1), this lack of opportunity for development was found to be frustrating on different levels. It was perceived as a serious barrier to utilizing existing skills, to career progression and to ultimately feeling a valuable asset in the organization. Blocking access to CPD could also potentially create feelings of resentment, as highlighted by one of the professional librarians: “My first job was at [...] university. I needed to work in three languages, be able to do all things in several other languages, I needed the postgraduate qualification and I was paid 12,000 a year and I was called an assistant” (P7). Leadership style, “higher management and their approach to things” (P6) played a key role in this process. For example, whereas the management of one public library local authority would block innovative ideas, another would invest in the person rather than the post: “They were excited to have an enthusiastic member of staff...I didn’t really have so much of okay you ‘are not professional’, ‘you are professional’” (P6).

However, CPD was not always supported even when it was directly related to a particular role. As one of the professional librarians put it “...it’s got to be my own time, my own initiative, my own reading, my own training, in my own time ...professionally you can’t remain sustainable” (P7). Another librarian explained that in terms of developing they did not feel supported because CPD is not taken “as serious” and most of the learning has been “informally through my own research through reading and through getting books” (P16). Similarly, one of the older librarians in this study had been involved in a number of digital initiatives, taking an active role in using online social communication media and working with e-content. However, they reported large gaps (4-5 years) in terms of their participation in formal training opportunities (P15). As another librarian put it, the possibilities of CPD were constrained in view of libraries “struggling with capacity and finances to release staff to attend courses and “to be sustainable in a time of change and cuts we have no

option but to share” (P11). Flexible learning via online information sharing and freely available courses was thus embraced by several librarians as key to less resource and time intensive CPD.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Librarians operate on the basis of a chameleon-like, polymath work ethic which requires them to be highly adaptable and demonstrate an overarching ability that covers a whole spectrum of technical and subject related skills. A European report on LIS competencies and aptitudes for information professionals [13] puts emphasis on traditional librarianship expertise, but also on technology, communication, management skills as well as other scientific knowledge associated with specific domains. Librarians are also expected to have the ability to adjust to and embrace rapid change in response to evolving end users’ needs and new paradigms of online information seeking and sharing. Therefore, continuous development and upgrading of knowledge and competencies underpin their working practices on multiple levels.

As this research demonstrated, librarians had different levels of CPD needs which put emphasis on the development of DIL as interconnected competencies; however, these were not always supported. CPD promotes innovation and creativity, and positions the library as the first port of call for its users. However, this vision requires a shared perspective where continuous learning and innovative ways of thinking are embraced within an organisational culture that is open to sharing. A learning organisation values teamworking, communication and employee empowerment via participatory management practices that respect the point of view, needs and aspirations of employees at all levels. It also means offering opportunities for shared decision-making, putting emphasis on staff qualities and professional growth, where individual employees are perceived as “containers of intangible investments” [14].

Libraries as learning organisations should develop a vision that permeates the entire library profession and fosters a learning culture for staff beyond the walls of single organisations. In the same way that libraries should think beyond the restriction of their physical space and resources, expand to online open access information spaces and deal with intelligent Internet sharing and social communication tools, learning should equally take place beyond the restrictions of space, location or timing. This is particularly true within an era of emerging technologies which have revolutionised the way in which library services are provided, but also at a time where limited available funds and resources create fewer opportunities for formal learning and development. Within this context, there is an emergent need for flexible, online learning that transcends geographical borders and enables sharing of expertise on online, synchronous or asynchronous learning spaces. There are currently very few good working examples of shared online flexible learning taking place for library staff of all levels (see for example “23 Things for Professional Development”²) and

² An online freely available continuing professional development course which focuses on the use of a range of Web 2.0 tools, such as, among others blogging, RSS feeds, Twitter, Facebook, Zotero. Available at <http://cpd23.blogspot.com/2011/05/cpd23-things.html>

increasing awareness of the affordances of technology in the areas of training and CPD is paramount for libraries.

It is not sufficient to rely any longer on basic understanding of technology, search skills and on the job experiential learning. The same technology that is challenging librarians also carries unprecedented affordances for them to demonstrate the value of their services and exchange their expertise across the globe. Librarians ought to be more flexible and adaptable in the ways in which they learn. As they are called to assert their roles in a changing technological environment there is also a need for a wider exchange of information and collaboration with other professional groups, who can provide their expertise on technology and contribute to librarians' development of digital literacy.

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