

# A discourse on the integration of library and information science educational program with professional practicum — The case of NSL

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**Abstract** There is an ongoing professional tension in the LIS community about the structural relationship between LIS education and professional practice in terms of the best way in fostering and strengthening the education program for librarianship. This is increasingly becoming an urgent issue due to the pressing demands of a rapidly changing information environment. The divergent viewpoints and approaches of these two professional bodies toward one of the most important issues of their common interest are further aggravated by each of their own entrenched professional provincialism as well as by their isolated professional undertakings. These factors are inevitably threatening the vitality and thriving of both bodies. In an attempt to ease this developing trend of professional tension from evolving further into a mutually self-destructive situation, it is suggested in this paper that librarians and library educators should join hands together and transcend their own provincial interest by solving this thorny issue of this professional tension which has multi-dimensional adverse impacts on both professional enterprises. The collaboration of these two parties can serve as a catalyst to bring the two professional groups together more closely and in an organic way to reconstruct a sound LIS educational program with an integral component of professional practicum such as the case of National Science Library, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS). The author believes that the integration of LIS education with professional practicum being offered at National Science Library of CAS (NSL) may shed light onto a new vista of hope for those who are so dedicated themselves to the changes of the LIS education.

**Keywords** LIS education, Competitive competency, Library practicum



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## 1 Introduction

There is an ongoing tension between library educators and library practitioners abroad<sup>[1]</sup>, as well as in China. M. Dewey addressed the apprenticeship learning style in the late 1800s, while Pierce Butler and Jesse Shera stressed on the philosophical basis of librarianship. What do we really want for library and information science

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(LIS) education; a purely theoretical approach or a practical approach, or both? The answer is still much in the air and unsettled.

Whether in China or in other parts of the world, the complaint or even criticism of LIS education never ceases. In the United States, many practitioners are convinced that the LIS schools have either abandoned educating librarians or that they are not educating them well enough to meet society's needs or both<sup>[2]</sup>. Some library practitioners argue that the library education is out of joint with modern library practice both at bachelor degree and postgraduate degree levels. Students are not being educated what the library administrators had hoped for. LIS graduates are not oriented toward acquiring abilities of solving practical problems. Library schools have not provided adequate education required for effective operation of the library in the new information age. Some library directors are even suspicious of the true value of LIS education so much that they rather recruit their staff from graduates of non-LIS fields instead. It is of great concern to those who are affiliated with librarianship that librarians are competing jobs with professionals from other fields such as information systems, Internet, and business management<sup>[3]</sup>.

LIS education is the backbone of the library profession. LIS education and LIS practice are just like two sides of a coin. They must support each other in a harmonious way for mutual development. We should rethink in depth about what is wrong with our education, re-examine seriously our education objectives, and re-design carefully our educational programs. We should strive to bridge the division between library education and professional practice to share a common vision and course of development.

## 2 Challenges and opportunities of LIS education

The root of the tension between LIS education and practice is attributed to the isolated and divergent efforts between the two professional bodies. LIS educators are involved in giving lectures based on published books and papers, and students are spoon-fed with out-of-date information about library practices. To a certain degree, both library educators and students stayed away from the actual library frontline operation. They are unaware of what are happening in the library, and of what the library is doing in meeting the information needs of the society at large. Quite a few faculty members have absolutely no practical experience in a real library work situation. Such a divide between library practitioners and library educators is becoming wider and deeper. Many library practitioners feel that the library education is driving apart in its own way and has divorced them as a natural career outlet.

This leads to LIS graduates in a dangerous situation of not finding meaningful jobs in libraries. On the contrary, non-LIS graduates are taking more and more professional vacancies in all types of libraries. This inevitably marginalizes LIS education. If LIS graduates become unemployable or sub-employed in major prestigious libraries, LIS education will lose its footing in the job market and in social rankings of careers as well. Thus LIS education will be in a danger of being irrelevant in the society.



In 2000, W. Lee Hisle remarked that “ensuring education of new librarians and reeducating existing librarians with skills and knowledge to support new roles in a digital information age” as one of the top issues facing academic libraries, and warned that the continued relevance of the MLS (Master in Library Science) to academic librarianship may be in question<sup>[4]</sup>. In 2001, Professor Cheng Huanwen (Sun Yat-Sen University), in a paper “*The Rise of Library Construction and the Decline of LIS Education*”, asserted that libraries were developing rapidly and began to enter an unprecedented golden age, but by contrast, LIS education was in steady decline and was to become an endangered species<sup>[5]</sup>. In fact, the situation has not been improved much so far.

Nancy A. van House and Stuart A. Sutton emphasized the importance of LIS education adaptive to the environment changes and warned with Panda Syndrome: “Without a rapid response and fundamental change, LIS education is likely to go the way of the pandas: cute, well-loved, coddled, and sadly near extinction”<sup>[6]</sup>.

Perhaps people would argue that the fact is over-exaggerated. LIS education seems in an unprecedented period of prosperity. LIS schools or departments are recruiting more and more newcomers, and graduates can always find jobs in a variety of fields and in different institutions. 94.98% of LIS graduate could find their jobs upon graduation<sup>[7]</sup>. Contrary to the opinion of library educators, library administrators are not accepting those LIS graduates with open arms due to the fact that these graduates have neither professional experience nor required abilities and practical skills to work as a professional librarian.

Some people proposed de-library movement of LIS education and it is one of the common trends of LIS education in Asia that the word “library” is eliminated from the names of LIS programs in order to attract students<sup>[8]</sup>. They advocated that pure science subject for LIS should be developed just like such other disciplinary studies as sociology, linguistics or mathematics. LIS education should not necessarily be related to any specific profession. This is misleading and a debasement of LIS education. What the really true value of a library is its ability and service rendered that meet its user’s information and cultural needs. It is a subject more similar to medicine, agriculture, law and architecture in that they all relate education with practice closely, and regard the development and elevated level of practice as their goal of being in the arena of professional education.

There is a desirable situation where LIS education integrates with practical training. Many libraries are employing highly qualified working professionals with Ph.D degree holders. They have rich experience and know the cutting edge of the subject matter as well as those applicable information technologies in their fields of expertise. Web environment makes communication and collaboration between library educators and librarians much easier and convenient. Meanwhile, libraries need researchers with solid theoretical foundation to cope with the complicated problems encountered frequently in library routine operations.

We have to recognize that LIS education, like many other professions, is affected profoundly due to the rapid development of information technology on the one hand,



and the explosive growth of knowledge on the other hand. The broad professional education makes more students find job in non-library markets, and finding jobs in non-library markets make LIS education offer more non-library courses. Nowadays, libraries have changed greatly with the evolution of information environment. Libraries are not the ones they were. Library educators have to keep abreast of the current development not only in the academic and technological fronts but also in the evolving situation of the library operation. LIS students have to be trained with a broad vision and practical ability to accommodate the rapid changing information environment of today as well as that of tomorrow.

The continued argument between library science educators and practicing librarians has no signs of subsiding and there seems to have no common ground for an amicable solution to this tension. The root of this disjoint is the isolated and divergent undertakings of these two groups of professionals. Educators and librarians are in the totally different world and being overshadowed by each of their own professional provincialism. They seldom seek to communicate with each other for collective problem solving.

As a solution to this tension, librarians and educators should unite to seek new ways of both strengthening LIS education and library operation. The collaborative approach for these two groups is the most effective way of educating students with vibrant, adaptive and competitive abilities. There are many ways of cooperation and collaboration, such as curriculum design, long-term planning, cooperative research, part-time teachers, guest lectures, co-operated lectures. The most important way is the frequent intellectual dialog between the two parties. LIS education community in Australia appealed that LIS educators cannot work in isolation: the LIS profession as a whole must work together collaboratively to ensure that it has a bright and relevant future<sup>[9]</sup>.

The job market potentials for LIS graduates depend on their ability to adapt themselves to a rapidly changing work environment. The requirements for the new LIS graduates to find library jobs depend on how LIS education squarely meets those information needs which are being provided by a modern library. Today's LIS programs must serve the existing profession well and help shape the profession of tomorrow. At the same time, they should also give strong and balanced support to the different needs in the arena of professional education as well as in professional practice.

According to B.W. Dearstyn<sup>[10]</sup>, the most vibrant and influential demands of library schools have the following features:

- to have broad, dynamic and evolving educational objectives;
- to stress the challenge of information management for the institution;
- to have a frequent appraisal, analysis, revision and update of the curriculums;  
and
- to be constantly involved in practice.

Dr. David Lankes from Syracuse University stated in his lecture at the Library of Congress on March 16, 2004 that LIS education should be oriented to the library



profession as well as to the academia, so as to bridge the division of library education and practice<sup>[1]</sup>. As an applied subject, LIS must be oriented to its practical application, to user's demands, and to professional practice. It is widely acknowledged that a sound librarian training program should consist of both theories and practice, which will produce the best workers for either and both fields of professional undertakings together<sup>[1]</sup>.

### **3 Creating a practical experience for LIS students — The case of National Science Library of CAS**

Just like those professional fields, such as medicine, agriculture, law, and architecture, in which educators and students are required to be involved closely in the clinic or the practicum, a sound LIS education should do the same. If a medical educator or student only know the knowledge but not the way how to cure a patient, it would be ridiculous and unimaginable. This is also applicable to the LIS profession.

National Science Library of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (NSL) began to have graduate programs in 1979, the first in the country to educate LIS students within a library institution. Now NSL has an enrollment of totally 430 graduate students, among them, 318 for Master degree and 112 for Ph.D. Among 430 graduate students, 241 have graduated and found their jobs, and 189 students are at school now. 64 advisors supervise students' study and engage in research.

The advising system in NSL is much different from that in universities that the library has developed good practice opportunities for the students. All the advisors are also library practitioners, researchers and educators. They usually have expertise in library operation or management in one subject field or another. Their first responsibility is to do collection development, reference service, system development, or something else. They also act as principal investigators to take on research projects in applied research, such as digital reference, Internet-based subject gateways, cross searching, digital repositories, long-term archiving, etc. They use the knowledge and techniques acquired in the practice and research to teach students. At the same time, they invite students to participate in the library work or/and projects that they are engaging. This greatly improves the students' practical experience and abilities in solving actual problems. These abilities allow them to know the latest development in the library field and to possess a competitive edge in the job market of the library.

For graduates, they remain to be an integral part of the library family. They are treated as colleagues of librarians. They simultaneously play the roles of students, researchers and practitioners. They learn from the practical work, they find topics for theses or dissertations from their experience-derived research projects, and publish the results based on the actual work experience. They have developed applied problem-solving abilities to deal with complicated problems that are unknown to them before.

Since 2005, assistant positions are available for graduate students, including research assistants and management assistants. Every student can apply for such a



position, if qualified, he or she will be chosen to act as an assistant of such a kind with a monthly allowance. They work day to day with librarians, and support a variety of the research or management tasks of the library.

At the beginning of 2006, NSL provided numerous research projects each year specifically for students. The students could apply for any of such listed projects based on his (her) interest and abilities by means of presentations to compete for these projects. Necessary guidance will be given through the whole research process. During the years 2006–2007, 34 students received financial aid and participated in 11 projects.

In addition, NSL sponsors a variety of training for librarians and students in every aspect of the library operation, which aims to improve their understanding and practice of current collection development, user services, system development, and information research in the library undertakings. The students can choose to attend various academic conferences, lectures and presentations in the library. Topics include but not limited to open access to scientific information, Chinese metadata standards, digital libraries and intellectual property right, digital preservation, etc. All activities are aimed to broaden the views of the student, give them the chances to communicate with learned scholars and experts, and strengthen their abilities to understand, analyze, and solve the problems that librarians are encountering on a daily basis.

The environment of connecting education with practice in NSL brings about good effects. The students are constantly inspired the presentations of papers or theses/dissertations. They can reflect those facts and data from their practical work and research projects. A rough statistical estimate indicates that ca. 1,000 papers and 6 monographs have been published during their school years since 1979. Many of the papers were published in top Chinese library journals. The common comments to these papers, theses and dissertations are that they are practical, problem-solving and innovative.

Many libraries have favorable impressions of graduates from NSL because these graduates have innovative ideas and practical skills and can jump start a new task. They have shown their competitive edge in library job markets and in other professional fields. Many have become the driving force of the great libraries.

NSL also train on-the-job graduate students for course learning. During the period of 2002–2006, 131 librarians have attended on-the-job training courses. They were required to take over 10 courses to complete the program while doing their work in their own libraries. This environment of integrating education with professional practice improves greatly the students' problem-solving abilities.

#### 4 Suggestions for LIS education

In a competitive and rapidly changing world, change is constant. LIS educators should be responsive to user's needs of this new information society in making relevant changes in their educational objectives, curriculum, internship and educators' structure. The most important of all is to create an environment congenial for students to combine LIS theory with professional practice. IFLA Guidelines for LIS Programs



**Library Practice**

(2000) stated that the program should incorporate appropriate means to allow students to appreciate the interplay between professional theories and their application in professional practice<sup>[12]</sup>. According to John N. Berry III, the profession must consider making the availability of a formal practicum a requirement for the accreditation of any LIS program<sup>[13]</sup>. The key is to provide LIS education with closer contacts with library practitioners, to change the state of its aloofness.

To conclude, the following suggestions for LIS education are proposed:

- A frequent and direct dialog mechanism should be developed to make close contact and partnership between LIS educators and library practitioners. Such ways may include but not limited to co-sponsor and co-participate in conferences, seminars or projects. Educators and practitioners should have more chances to discuss the current issues and problems at libraries and in LIS field, to exchange ideas and to propose relevant policies for the government to adopt and to promulgate if called upon.
- As a compulsory course, LIS educator and students must do the library practical work as an integral curricular routine, just like medical professors and medical students. All the LIS educators and students must have the background of practical library experience to change the education ecology, making the education more practical and up-to-date. The internship should last at least 3 to 6 months, including the key routines of library operation. The abilities of LIS students should be judged by their abilities of solving practical problems in an innovative way.
- More practitioners are invited as part-time educators to give lectures or topics of their expertise, bringing their practice experience and requirements to the classroom to stir the interest and curiosity of the students. In library schools in USA, almost all of this kind of adjunct faculties come from the frontline workers of the library;
- Library practitioners invite more LIS educators and students to participate in the library projects to help solve practical issues of the library. Library projects should be open to all students and faculty members alike, so as to attract more educators' involvement in the efforts of integrating library theories with practice.
- Based on about 50 libraries that offer graduate programs in China, more qualified libraries should join in hands to educate LIS students with opportunities of practical training. The graduates from these library schools or libraries have sound professional training to meet the specific needs of the library. In NSL, most of department heads graduated from NSL. LIS graduates are playing an increasingly important role not only in libraries *per se*, but also in this information society at large as well.

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