Some views on the development of professional library education in Brazil

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Algumas reflexões sobre o desenvolvimento do ensino da ciência da informação no Brasil

Resumo

Homenagem aos 25 anos do Curso de Pós-graduação em Ciência da Informação do CNPq/IBICT-UFRJ/ECO. Relata a experiência de um professor do programa de pós-graduação no Brasil e trata do impacto desse programa nas escolas de biblioteconomia. Pretende elucidar o que são os cursos de biblioteconomia, os desafios para a profissão, currículos, o papel futuro do bibliotecário, além dos assuntos como tecnologia, sobrevivência da biblioteca atual e a capacitação do bibliotecário do futuro.

Palavras-chave

Formação profissional; Biblioteconomia; Ciência da informação; Pós-graduação; Currículo; Escola de biblioteconomia; IBICT; Brasil.

Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to accept an invitation to contribute to this special issue celebrating 25 years existence of the Postgraduate programme. I participated in it for the first time in 1972 and three subsequent years. It was an experience I regard as unequalled and has many very pleasant memories, not least because of the immense friendliness and hospitality afforded me and my wife who twice accompanied me. Everyone worked hard and the results were most rewarding and assured the permanence of Postgraduate education. Since that time much of consequence has occurred.

It is a testimony to the vigour of Library Science and practice in Brazil that the Library & Information Science Abstracts yields some 800 items on a variety of aspects. All of this activity has been due to the developing professional quality and deserved recognition of library and information science workers throughout the country. This evident professionalism has stemmed from the determined efforts of those who took on the responsibility for establishing the graduate profession in the 1960s.

The status of librarians

As with so many developing countries at that time, there were few nationals qualified to teach to the desired standards and to provide the proper academic status so desperately needed. Even in the developed countries the status of librarians was a matter for constant struggle and negotiation against a background of continual discount. Low pay, low esteem and often unacknowledged skills fostered a consensus that librarians were dull and had abilities more associated with social competency than scholarly standing.

We need to remind ourselves that such an undervaluing of the profession after the Second World War was in spite of the exceedingly high standards demanded by the Professional Associations as examining bodies. Those gaining professional qualifications at Associate or Fellowship levels in the UK, for example, had attained a genuinely high standard of professionalism. Despite this, the profession was faced everywhere by a need to be accepted as comparable to other professions. It is a sad fact that in the private sector no librarian has ever made it to the Boardroom. Accountants, lawyers, engineers, personnel managers even make it, since their expertise is understood and accepted as being relevant at executive level within the organisation as a whole. Librarians have still to convince management that information/library education and experience can mould the potential director equally as well as other professions. Such an unsatisfactory public image led to a discernible reduction over the years in traditional library applicants to the schools. Such a situation has given rise to constant attempts to change that image by altering the name.

Impact on library schools

So library schools have at different times dropped the term 'Librarianship' in favour of such terms as 'Information Studies', Information Science', 'Communications studies', 'Information Management', only to discover that these seriously overlap many computer oriented activities and the many other spheres in which information is organised and retrieved. Concurrently the schools gradually loosened their hold on the traditional librarianship subjects in favour of a '*more modern approach'*. This has had the effect of blurring the professional orientation of the courses and detracting from the identity of librarians and information people. At the same time curriculum development has followed the inevitable lines dictated by technology. The content is broadening and is subject to continual change in step with information systems growth. Ironically some library schools in an attempt to stabilise the curriculum and to recreate a specialist core have decided to reintroduce the term 'Librarianship' into their title. Whatever nomenclature is chosen, the inescapable fact is that what we considered to be our field is being constantly invaded by those from other disciplines with qualifications well suited to information handling environments. Later in this article I will go on to discuss what seems to be the implications for the profession.

Professional education

Brazil has therefore not been alone in recognising the need to raise the professional nature of library education and to look for ways of gaining that all important status of academic quality alongside other professions. While there were courses, it was not until the 1960s that undergraduate courses became available. As in many countries, becoming a graduate profession was eminently necessary but subsequent development into Postgraduate studies was an unavoidable progression if the profession was to attain full academic recognition and acceptance. Without the right level of teacher a Masters course could not be viable. Fortunately in the early 1970s there were professionally recognised experts such as Tefko Saracevic, Derek Langridge, Jack Mills, Wilf Lancaster, and Douglas Foskett all of whom had international reputations and who were able to give a much needed boost to the whole professional education programme in Brazil generally, in addition to laying the foundations for the future. In the many courses they ran, they set a standard which motivated students highly and encouraged work which attained admirable results, despite the need for everything to be in English. The creditable efforts of such people totally vindicated the costs involved and some, to their immense credit, went on to take doctorates abroad. One might here pause for thought as to the timing of such a venture. That all these experts were at the height of their reputations, was due to the very genuine climate of information as a science, and research programmes which engendered

worldwide interest. At this time professionals were offered theoretical approaches to indexing and classification from such as Ranganathan (Colon classification and facet analysis – PMEST), Mills (Classification theory) , Cleverdon (the Cranfield experiments), Farradane (relational indexing), Coates (British Technology Index faceted scheme), Austin (BNB Precis indexing system), Needham (Organisation of knowledge), Garfield and de Solla Price (Bibliometrics), Salton (Information retrieval) and so on.

It was an exciting time, when the whole theoretical base for Library Science was at its height, and students could gain genuine inspiration from the writings of such stimulating people.

The postgraduate courses

When I was invited to provide one of the courses for the Masters programme, at that time still not recognised by the University, I was greeted by a group of lively, highly intelligent people dedicated to the idea of enhancing their professional competence and at the same time raising the whole potential of the profession for the future. That first cohort of students, like others following them, has been responsible in large measure for profound changes to professional education and acceptance by other professionals as a truly academic and skilled occupation. It would be unsatisfactory to pick out individuals in relation to their contribution to this advancement. However, I feel sure that many who might read this, would not disagree that Dr. Gilda Braga and Dr. Rosali Fernandez de Souza, now at the very heart of professional education at IBICT, eminently demonstrate the dedication which has enabled others to profit from those early days.

It should be understood that the support afforded by CNPq for the programme was wholehearted but not necessarily constant because of periodic changes of administration and government officials. Despite these uncertainties, government backing channelled through ministers with a deep conviction and enthusiasm for librarianship as a national asset, did play a significant role in establishing the Postgraduate courses. However, while there was no guarantee, everyone expected that the University would be most likely to agree that the Masters was indeed academically acceptable. At that time, IBBD, as it was then, had a rather traditional profile which did not favour negotiations with officialdom. Perhaps the appointment of Celia Zaher as Director with her dynamic and flamboyant personality, provided a necessary wind of change. Nevertheless, it was not just the work of IBBD which governed progress. Many respected professionals, often of the 'old school' helped to foster the necessary climate for encouraging the young inheritors. The head of the National Library , Janice de Melo Monte-Mór, was the first professional to be appointed. Her care and concern for professional education and status was echoed by others and undoubtedly contributed significantly to the fruitful outcome of negotiations while courses were already in progress. Other professionals gave their support by providing a course or just by participating in the deliberations and negotiations which finally gained recognition.

Maybe we should record here too the very real contribution which the British Council made in helping to recruit and finance the expert teachers who started the Masters programme. It is sometimes forgotten that the BC have to cope with an overwhelming number of similar requests across a wide range of disciplines. That librarianship was chosen for such sustained support is indeed a matter for recognition and congratulation.

The challenges for the profession

It is interesting to note that there are now a number of Brazilian writers discussing the past and the future for professional education (Refs. 1-12). It is a mark of the maturity which this has attained that people are now questioning just what must now be the objectives for such education. Indeed the very coverage and content of courses require reappraisal as change forces differences in

emphasis. The dilemma we now face is to define what can sensibly be claimed as **core studies**, and identify the relevance of a range of courses which, together with

the core, can be deemed to have an identifiable professional orientation and excellence. Nowadays library schools in many countries are finding it increasingly difficult to provide a curriculum which has sufficient distinctive themes to separate it from those of other courses covering a disparate range of theory and skills. There is no doubt that technology is pushing the professions to rethink the nature of their professionalism. In the case of LIS (Library & Information Science) it is clear that we have to accept the diminution of traditional areas considered to be the core of our expertise and exclusive to those educated to professional level.

What we now discover is that the range of theory and skills is not exclusive to us, but is adapted to our expected environments. Unfortunately even this is being eroded because management techniques are dominating enterprises both governmental and private. Those with demonstrable managerial capability are monopolising the top jobs, where efficiency, cost benefit analysis and value added services rule the agenda.

Amidst this climate of value for money such scholarly pursuits as classification, cataloguing, and historical bibliography find ever fewer outlets. This is not to say they are totally unwanted, but to stress the centralisation and automated nature of their applications which in turn will require ever fewer people for them. Once every library system had highly skilled and often erudite indexers running a cataloguing department and maintaining the complex catalogues (classified or dictionary) which served as the finding tool for users. Now much of this is done remotely and downloaded, or in the case of cooperatives, held centrally online. Most library and information staff now have no need to understand the underlying rules for generating catalogue entries. As full text systems grow in popularity, favouring commercial expediency, even the formal catalogue entry may well be abandoned.

Determining the optimum curriculum

So educators are faced with the task of selecting a diet of courses which together offer an exclusiveness sufficient to satisfy current and future professionals, and at the same time provide a distinctiveness to differentiate our curriculum from others in the academic arena. Such a task is becoming increasingly more difficult. Computer topics – data modelling, databases, hypertext, artificial intelligence, expert systems, virtual reality and so on are the very essence of information handling and yet students everywhere study these subjects in relation to many contexts. While we must cover these areas, we cannot claim them as special to LIS. Management techniques such as total quality management develop attitudes and abilities comparable to those applied in any organisation - again not exclusive to our field of endeavour. Even when we look at information seeking we discover that systems are being developed deliberately to make them friendly and suited to the end user without the need for an intermediary.

The future role of librarians

So we come face to face with what is now an intractable question - 'What are libraries intended to achieve?'. Where illiteracy and lack of education are rife, there is no difficulty in acknowledging that libraries have a key role in promoting and underpinning an education programme of national proportions. In Brazil the Public Library must surely have a genuine place in society. Many children and adults have still not attained a level of literacy which would allow the library service to abandon its usual community-wide role. This being the case, there will be a demand for librarians who can provide users with appropriate guidance through the library's resources and who will enthusiastically promote library use among the many who are disinclined to take advantage of the free service. If social change for the good is to be a reality, then there is a need for constant encouragement to the populace to enjoy recreational and serious reading. In other words there

continues to be a pressing need for the 'traditional role' of librarians. At the same time a minority of users will expect to have help in accessing sophisticated electronic services. So such librarians need to be competent in both roles.

Technological change and the library

Despite what I have said above, it is undoubtedly true that libraries will change radically. Traditionally they have been gatherers of printed matter for the benefit of a population who individually could not afford to buy such material and who would not have the expertise to acquire it. By providing public money, it has been possible to create book collections for the benefit of the community as a whole. The professionalism of librarians was demonstrated by their ability to select suitable material, which meant spending the money wisely and with the needs of the users as a paramount consideration, and giving users expert help in exploiting a

collection which would be organised on best principles. While the needs of the community remain relatively simple, the library service needs to retain these objectives. It is the emergence of modern society which is undermining the very purpose and structure of a library.

We are now at the stage when anyone can own a computer be it desktop or laptop. Such machines have capabilities far exceeding those of 20 years ago. Multimedia, online access and downloading, E-Mail, Fax and all the concomitant processing power, put an awesome amount of self-sufficiency into the hands of anyone who has enough money and interest. With the impressive growth of Internet, the burgeoning market for CD-ROMs, the increasing speeds of operation for file transfer, the very large storage capacities available and the prolific amount of software for all of this, there seems to be every reason to suppose that traditional users of library services will now become self-sufficient **'end users'.**

It is not so much that this curricula content is exclusive to this profession, but that the mix of subject and the emphasis given to them is particular to those who intend to work in library or information environments. So the nett result of 'progress' is that where large numbers of the population have still to attain an acceptable level of literacy, then the old fashioned library service is still needed. But alongside this will be the sophisticated service which eventually will cause the conventional service to reduce, though it is unlikely that it will ever completely die out because there will always be a section of the community who have not profited from the educational system for a variety of reasons. So librarians – there is a future out there! It is up to you to ensure that you are part of it and that the education you get properly equips you for a professional life. However, let me end on a note of caution. Traditionally librarians have been linked into the cultural fabric of the country. While embracing the changes occasioned by technology, it is to be hoped that those established responsibilities of having a care for social and cultural development will not be abandoned. Whatever it may seem to commercially driven professions, we should not be ashamed of the social concern librarians have always shown towards the educationally disadvantaged generally and minorities in particular.

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Abstract

Commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the graduate course in Information Science of the CNPq/IBICT-UFRJ/ECO. Recounts the experience of a teacher in the graduate program in Brazil and discusses the impact of this program on Schools of Library Science. Elucidates on information science courses, challenges to the profession, curricula, the future role of the librarian, in addition to issues such as technology, survival of the library as we know it, and training librarians for the future.

Keywords

Professional trainning; Library science; Information science; Graduate study; Curriculum; School of library science; IBICT; Brazil.

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