PLURALISM AND THE EDUCATION OF THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL

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ABSTRACT

There is an continuing effort to identify an unifying direction in the design of Information Science curricula. Fragmentation hampers this effort. There are numerous job titles. Other factors are: lack of accreditation by ALA (American Library Association), need to re-educate some of the faculty, and the need for consensus on a core curriculum. Several educators perceive the need to reach consensus. They seem to be in agreement that there is a core of knowledge and skills relevant to all information professionals.

Broadbent believes that by specifying competencies the curriculum would produce information professionals involved in service by way of information management. This management has the ability to anticipate, understand, interpret, and enhance the commodity of information and the process of informing.

Brown is one who has overseen a curriculum to educate a generic information professional.

It is agreed by all that it is vital to the profession to discontinue pluralism and develop a more generic approach while allowing for some flexibility.

INTRODUCTION

Pluralism exhibits itself through the many disciplines and academic fields that claim the information professional as its own. It exhibits itself in the diversity of academic programs purporting to educate the information professional. It exhibits

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itself in the multitudinous job titles that abound.

**Pluralism** philosophically is a theory that there is more than one basic principle. Much effort has gone into designing curricula which attempt to cover as many aspects as appear in the job market. This is recognized as futile and in no way adequate to maintaining the field against encroachment. Searching for the "unified curriculum" sounds like searching for the holy grail of yore with about as much success.

A paradigm is the statement of the proper domain of a science. It is not a theory but the foundation for a theory. Further exploration of pluralism and paradigm brings to light the work of Olaisen (Norway, 1985) and Cronin (U.K., 1983). On the other hand Garrison (U.S., 1988) speaks to the need for a "united field". Browne (Australia, 1988) presents a bachelor's level curriculum to educate a generic information professional. Taken altogether perhaps there may be the beginnings of a solution.

**RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Research directions point to the emphasis given within a curricula. Olaisen is critical of the attempts by library/information sciences to appear to be scientific by concentrating on statistical methods. Research he believes should not concentrate on "functionalism", the empiricistic paradigm but on the sociopolitical one. This is where some predictable uniformities in behavior might exist. He is thinking in terms of comparative studies. In addition, the "subjective" paradigm which is the product of subjective and intersubjective experience of individuals and the "liberating" paradigm can best present research on understanding the user and human behavior in different situations. For example, study the needs and the factors involved with information-seeking on the one hand, and stress the importance of values on the other. Research concerning values can be extended to national library policy, free access to information and the problem
of the non-user. Thus, he advocates pluralism in research direction versus the one principle of functionalism.

This functionalism paradigm now is the province of the "database entrepreneurs." Therefore he suggests or indeed admonishes that more attention be given to the behavioral and organizational problems and types of needs, information resources, and information transfer.

Although the foregoing says a lot about the directions research should take it has not given the implementation for the education and development of the "new" information professional.

FORCASTS 1983–1988

The 1983 forecast is all too real now. In 1983 Cronin forecasted the present situation in 1988. He stated then that "Many of the functions performed by librarians (and information professionals) will in years ahead be performed by individual end-users." Educational pluralism will flourish. Part-time, mixed mode, modular and certification-linked courses will be prevalent. The gradual de-institutionalization of information work will be reflected in a pot pourri of courses. By 1990, library schools will be but one of many offering specialist education and training. Pluralism and frequent reconfiguration will be the norm. Library educators have not yet "harmonized" education for the traditional market and will find it difficult to integrate information science professionals. The next ten years (1983–1993) will be marked by divergence between library science education and education for information.

Faculty retreading will be a continuous process. Schools that have staff tenure locked and resistant to change have inertia. On the other hand, schools with a faculty committed to self-development will prosper. The education field is crowded so schools will have to market to meet the competition of other disciplines offering courses and curricula in information.
After having examined the concepts behind pluralism and then Cronin's forecast. Garrison's (1988) perception of today and tomorrow is much more encouraging. He is searching for some indication of an unified field. What he sees are five disciplines; information/library science, business, computer science, engineering, and communications, all expanding their curricula to incorporate information courses, usually systems and sometimes management. Such being the case, there is not as yet the emergence of a new discipline with professional degrees, having a broad view of information and able synthesize from all the previously mentioned disciplines. He thinks it will probably be years before any agreement is reached as to the education of information professionals. Mostly right now an attempt is being made to incorporate the field by producing more courses but not recognizing the total curriculum.

The ALA has not been successful in arranging an accreditation for information science with related professional associations, ACM (Association for Computing Machines), DPMA (Data Processing Management Association). Both have produced model curricula at BS and MS levels. AACSB (American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business) accredits the MIS in business schools which constitutes a huge establishment.

Despite such obstacles, Garrison believes an unified field is emerging. He sees Library/Computer Science schools bringing on faculty from many disciplines and designing curricula focusing on:

* Information content not technology per se
* Information transfer
* Interaction of users with information systems of all kinds.

The mission statement for these curricula would be to facilitate application of information to human needs in the broadest possible way. Syracuse, Rutgers, and Pittsburgh and pointed out by him as having successful undergraduate programs. Also they do not "intersect" with the BS in MIS in business schools.
PRESENT EFFORTS

Before going on any further it is worth noting that not the least of the problems in designing curricula and defining the field, is the difficulty of defining the Information Professional. Oen and Cooper (1988) give no definition but after examining the number of job titles see that as a fragmenting influence. Perhaps they suggest a starting point would be agreement on competences. Broadbent (1988) specifies competencies in that she believes the educational outcomes for information professionals should produce individuals “who are able to anticipate, understand, interpret, and enhance the commodity of information and the process of informing”. This she says involves information services by way of information management. For information management is the process of acquiring, organizing and manipulating collections of data elements to add value to them when meeting specific user needs. Such was expressed in 1983 by Brinberg and by Taylor in 1986. Taylor perceives the information system as formal sets of organized activities that add value to messages being processed. Note that the major concern of these authors is with content (ala Garrison) or the value of information (Olaisen’s “liberating” paradigm) and the meaning of messages to people. This is in agreement with Broadbent (1988) who sees the focus as being on information work for others and on the content of messages NOT on the conduct or technology. Thus course development she proposes must anticipate human and societal needs.

Her core curriculum (1984) for information management includes:

* Information context
* Human information processing
* Information processing technology
* Information organization
* Information sources
* Organizational environments
* Information Systems Analysis
* Specialization for a specific system or service and user environment

She expanded into offering service courses and programs in 1988. Hayes (1988) identifies a core curriculum:

* Organization of information
* Information retrieval
* Selection and management

PLUS orientation to the profession--sadly lacking in many schools.

On the other hand, Moll and Flood (1988) state what Information sciences should not be:

1 – Subsumed by disciplined, mission, or industry
2 – Training practitioners for the market
   (Skills for today--principles for tomorrow)
3 – Technology Bound
   (rapid obsolescence)

and recommend that ASIS should develop recommendations for program content.

As if in answer to Moll and Flood, Browne (1988) has overseen the development of a bachelor level curriculum to educate the generic information professional.

She believes there is a core of knowledge and skills relevant to all informational practitioners. The premise for the development of this curriculum was: Future of education for information work lay in the preparation of graduates to work in a variety of new information positions opening up outside traditional library settings in public and private sectors.

Given: Although information professionals work in diverse fields a large group of them share a common set of functions:
Pluralism and the Education of the Information Professional

* Identification of information need
* Information search design
* Retrieval of information
* Evaluation
* Analysis
* Synthesis
* Packaging
* Re-packaging
* Dissemination
* Design and provision of information services

Importantly the curriculum was based on theoretical approaches, clearly distinguishing between theory and application. In support of this Moll and Flood have shown that for the past ten years fundamental concepts have been emerging to support a theoretical foundation for information science. Furthermore, Hays believes that there should be greater emphasis on theory; conceptualization; problem identification and definition.

Some of the criteria for the generic information professional curriculum are:

1. Field must have significant literature
2. Studies should provide basic understanding of organization and structure of the discipline; the major principles and concepts which underlie the discipline; the methods and reasons for the development of their application
3. Deals with problem-solving
4. Students have opportunity to develop ability to absorb and evaluate new information, concepts or empirical evidence contained in the literature: how this information is related and applied to practical problems.

Eventually agreement was reached on fundamental and relevant concepts. For example;

1. User satisfaction, information need
   Theories of classification, information seeking behavior
2 – Concepts from social sciences and humanities theories of interpersonal communications
   Boolean logic, epistemology, human information processing, problem solving
   plus psychology, communications, sociology of work and organizations

* Educational Outcome: intellectual skills;

   description, analysis, evaluation, synthesis, ability to blend precision and imagination, construct and express arguments, understand patterns underlying phenomena, realize that all knowledge has inherent qualities of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Ability to develop criteria for evaluating the relative validity and usefulness of information within the context of ambiguous and tentative knowledge was considered to be of great importance.

CONCLUSION

You have read the argument for pluralism in research and the argument for a unified curriculum.

This author concludes that pluralism was necessary in the past in order to produce many differing curriculum designs, but now that evolution has reached a peak and evidence points to emerging consensus, it is time to 'freeze' the design, get on with accreditation or lose the field to the competition.

REFERENCES

3. Ibid. p.355-357.