Warning: Opinions Ahead

It’s February as I write this column and, over the last few weeks, I have had the wonderful opportunity to speak at four LIS schools that prepare future librarians and information professionals to enter our field. It was such a treat to visit and give lectures or keynotes at the University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, Dalhousie University, and the University of Alberta. I have also had the real privilege to sit on advisory boards over the years at a few other schools like San Jose State University, University of Buffalo, Clarion University, Dalhousie University, and the University of Toronto. I have visited and spoken at many more – Rutgers, Catholic, McGill, University of Maryland, San Jose, Simmons, Syracuse, University of Washington, etc. in addition to a large number of Library Technician diploma programs. As SLA President I visited a number of SLA Student Chapters as well. I’ve also been lucky enough to participate in a number of leadership institutes for mid-career librarians. I mention this because I’ve had the great opportunity to be in the front row as LIS education has evolved to meet the needs of a changing future. Just at the outset, let me assert that I am not one of those people who derides new graduates or complains about the quality of LIS education. I am, frankly, very impressed by the vast majority of new students, graduates and teaching faculty. They’re more diverse, highly committed and ready to join the profession at large.

I can never understand those who publicly complain about the quality of LIS education, who disrespect their own school or education, or other LIS graduates, and do little to provide substantive input in a usable way to LIS faculty, directors or deans, or to ALISE, the Association of Library and Information Science Educators [http://www.alise.org/]. I know a lot of other professionals - lawyers, nurses, accountants, dentists, doctors – and I can’t remember a single one who stood there and asserted that the rigour of their education was substandard, prepared them poorly for their work, or was just ‘lite’. And yet, in our profession I hear and read this so often. It’s the proverbial gunshot to the foot! Indeed librarians have an anonymous (sorry, pseudonymous) columnist who regularly publishes her/his/their contempt for LIS education and serves up the myth that grads are unemployable or will fail. I am appalled. I see none of this as an informed and experienced observer. Indeed, I see people working hard to steer the ship of LIS education while suffering under the burden of an antiquated and less than visionary or flexible accreditation system that serves as a limiter on innovation and experimentation.

Not Your Mother’s Library School

“Library School” has changed mightily since I was a new grad in 1980. Then again, so have the worlds of librarianship and the associated information professions. Indeed, it has changed many times as the world that librarianship inhabits has changed. Some
fret about the evolution of core cataloguing courses into a wider range of database design and metadata skills that continue to encompass cataloguing as a subset of skills. Some worry that the emerging emphasis on an increase in optional courses aligned with a student’s needs or goals, versus curriculum indoctrination with standardized core courses, dilutes librarianship’s core mandate and values. I worry less about this and admire the continuing integration into the master’s curricula innovative discussions, projects, and methods to cover a wide plethora of issues that have emerged in more recent times. I recall very few deep discussions in my own MLS about ethical quandaries, with rarely more than a tip-of-the-hat to difficult issues of confidentiality and privacy, and my technology education was pedestrian (since the PC didn’t exist yet and the Internet was nascent). Our schools have been adept, if not speedy, at change. As for the key competencies I required at work, I learned them on the job. That’s what I call ‘practice’. Things like marketing, advocacy, relationship building, leadership, management, politics and more were learned as I worked through trial, error, failure, and practice, along with association volunteer activities. I see all of these things introduced in the modern LIS curricula I’ve been visiting. Sometimes they are separate courses and other times they are emphasized across the curriculum. I am always impressed with the students’ informed perspectives on issues of everything from social media, Anonymous, Occupy, hackers, or Julian Assange.

**Practice of Librarianship**

I always remind myself that we practice librarianship. We’re never fully done and every day of practice should make us better. In the past year I went to an academic conference in Toronto and one academic librarian stood up and made an impassioned plea that the library schools do a better job – directed at the Dean of my local library school who sat on the panel. Her story ran like this, and I’m paraphrasing. “Your graduates are good at all that technology stuff, but the last one I hired was far too nervous making a board presentation two weeks into her first job! You need to do a better job.”

My reaction was to stay quiet - which I regret to this day. What an unrealistic and unfeeling and disconnected point of view. At its worst she removed herself from the equation and denied her own professional responsibility to coach and mentor new colleagues. My dark side wanted to ask how she arrived on the scene after her MLS so fully formed and capable with no work experience and could she please inform us of what strategy our LIS schools could employ to create more gods of librarianship such as her? Professional education can teach you skills and competencies. It can also frame issues and allow for discussion to lock down your professional ‘approach’ to issues and challenges. As for the soft skills – management, leadership, communication, presenting, planning, performance management, advocacy, teaching, and so many more – that’s the practice part and we get better at what we practice and what we don’t practice can wither. Getting the frameworks in school doesn’t replace experiential learning. In times of dynamic change, we see stressors in keeping up with technology and, often, more recent graduates have polished skills in this area. Barring natural talents, those of us who’ve been practicing longer, should (note: ‘should’) have
improved skills as well. That’s the nature of a ‘profession’ and professionalism demands that we encourage and mentor new entrants into our field.

The 64 Crayon Box

I use the metaphor of the 64 crayon box of colours a lot. I love the even bigger one with the built-in sharpener. Librarianship is a very complex disciple, maybe even a science, but labels aren’t important. We’re a big box and can accommodate many styles and talents in our field. There is no one route to success or a simple, long-lasting measure of competence. Those who try to build an eight crayon set of rules for our profession miss the point – and the opportunity. We’re so much more than that and the challenges facing our field cannot be addressed with simple solo efforts. It takes a team, indeed, it takes a profession.

I am impressed with the diversity of programs and perspectives I see in our schools of LIS education. I’m impressed with the iSchool movement but don’t think that’s the only strategy. I’m impressed with those schools that are going fully e-learning but I’m also stunned at what happens in those that focus on smaller, more on-campus, face-to-face instruction. I am floored at those that focus on certain niches of librarianship in a highly thoughtful and targeted way – from rural librarianship, to teacher librarianship, to researchers for the private sector or a focus on the human-computing interface. I am excited for those offering joint degrees with key programs like MBAs, masters of public administration, law degrees, journalism, and more. All of these represent a widening of our field and the size of the tent we inhabit and influence.

So, Back to the Future

So what impressed me about these students that I met most recently? Beyond just some excellent presentation and public speaking skills, I find that many can write for purpose in many dimensions – blogs, social media, essays, reports, videos, podcasts, and more. There has been a huge generational uptick in the ability to present versus my graduation skills of viewgraphs and 3x5 cue cards!

First, I’ve attended more than my share of student planned and run conferences. These were the equal of anything I’ve seen and not just in terms of fine organization. I attend a lot of conferences! These were visionary and stretched the imagination. They all included their local library community and built relationships there. In addition to showing student projects (more on that later), they invited the international speakers that they wanted to hear on their campus.

Now I’ll give you highlights of some of the projects I saw. At Dalhousie teams of students presented on the iPhone and Android apps. Not just the concept but, wow, these were ready for market, approved and available in the online stores. These were tools that practicing librarians in the audience wanted to get their hands on right away to use. What made this more exciting to me was that the project requirements were that the LIS students had to work with computer science students in another faculty, as well
as a major external database vendor, to develop the app. They needed to report on how that went and how collaboration worked. Does that sounds like real life or not?

One of the grad students in the Dalhousie program, Michael Groenendyk and his team, are building a 3D model repository: an open database filled with three-dimensional scans of interesting objects in the university’s possession. The files can be freely downloaded in their full detail and viewed in most common 3D modeling applications. They use a Makerbot Replicator installation at the Killam Library, a project that offers cheap 3D printing to students and faculty. The 3D repository currently holds only a handful of files but teases at a future for library collections.

Many LIS schools have adopted a portfolio approach. LIS students keep an online portfolio of their work – websites, IOS apps, bibliographies, LibGuides, research papers, marketing studies, focus group reports, and much more. Some these faculties promote their students in this way, some students make it part of their résumés. Candidates for LIS schools can see the kind of work that’s expected of them in the school. Take a look and see the nature of the work and the talents arriving in our workplaces. Hire some of them!

Lastly, I have been reading some LIS dissertations recently. How geeky is that!? Yes, I’m finding PhD candidates’ work that is actually current, useful and practical. As a special librarian that tends to be my focus, although I do respect the more arcane history of the book and cultural studies in our field. I just don’t find them to be as immediately applicable. Here are two I found fascinating. The first one is an exploration of what comprises and works as leadership training for librarians and what specific things can predict success. The second one worked with political decision makers in the library budgeting context – yes, those folks who control so many library budgets – and measured and prioritized which activities and techniques were the most powerful and successful. I am waiting for these to go online so that I can point to them on my blog. If I can, I may devote a future column to each.

So, in conclusion, as SLA members we have a professional responsibility to build the next generation of librarians and information professionals through support and coaching and learning from them as well. We gain nothing by taking them down, demotivating them or slamming our own degrees in an unconstructive way.

Stephen Abram, MLS is a strategy, marketing and direction planning consultant with Dysart & Jones. He is a Past President of SLA, the Ontario Library Association and the Canadian Library Association. He is the author of ALA Edition’s Out Front with Stephen Abram and Stephen’s Lighthouse Blog. Stephen would love to hear from you at stephen.abram@gmail.com.