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# The Limits of Library School: A North Carolina Reconciliation

Duncan Smith

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## A Confession

On the best of days I was an average student. In fact, the only way I got into library school was by doing well in an admissions interview. These two items, however, have little to do with the fact that library school has not made it to my "Best Things in Life" list. I reserve that privilege for a very different factor which occurred before I attended my first day of class.

Before I attended library school, I spent two years working in a public library, and every practicing librarian I then respected warned me that library school, like growing up, was something to be endured. So even before I lived through my first lecture, my expectations were less than great.

These feelings are particularly troublesome to me these days since I am now on the other side of the fence. I find myself working in a library school. This situation is complicated by the fact that during my brief tenure at North Carolina Central University's School of Library and Information Sciences, I have enjoyed a number of job titles. Two of these titles are Practitioner-in-Residence and Coordinator of the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program. It is disturbing to me that the title I have preferred is Practitioner-in-Residence. It is disturbing to me because this preference indicates a reluctance on my part to be associated with library education. This reluctance has caused me some loss of sleep and many dark nights of the soul. This article is a personal attempt to reconcile library school and the practice of our profession.

## Preparing to Practice

In retrospect, I view a large part of my dissatisfaction with library school with the fact that library school wanted to talk about theory while I wanted to get on with being a librarian. My impatience stemmed from the fact that I had worked

in a library for two years, for god's sake. I knew what it was like and I also knew that most of the stuff I was studying was of little or no practical value. Well, anyone who remembers anything about Genesis knows that a little knowledge or experience can be a dangerous thing. In my case, this knowledge didn't let me see the forest for the trees. My previous work experience led me to have unreal expectations of library school. I felt that the purpose of library school was to make me a librarian. It is my belief, at this point in my career, that this is not the purpose of library school. The purpose of library school is not to make anyone a librarian. The purpose of library school is to ensure that an individual can become a librarian.

Library school prepares us to practice our profession. To assume that the product of any library education program is a librarian is to place an unfair burden on library school as an institution and to do a disservice to ourselves as a profession. The product of library school is an individual who is prepared to use future work experience (i.e., practice) to develop the skills and abilities needed to become a professional librarian. Individuals become professional librarians, not so much from what they learn in library school, as from what library school has prepared them to learn on the job.

## On-the-Job Training

Our profession is one that is learned by doing. While reference theory prepares us to conduct a reference interview, it is only through the provision of reference service to our public that we become reference librarians. It is only by translating selection theory into those first painful book selections for our clientele that we become collection development specialists. Presenting book talks to our fellow library school students may prepare us to do book talks and story hours, but it isn't until children and parents are our audience that we become true storytellers.

On-the-job is where library school fulfills its promise to assist us in becoming librarians. The

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sometimes messy blending of theory and practice on the job is where we become professionals. Learning on the job, however, has its limitations just as library school has its limitations.

There are two primary limitations to on-the-job learning. The first is that the primary function of a working librarian is the provision of service, not professional development. Librarianship as a rule does not provide its new practitioners with a formal internship. Our jobs are not intentionally structured to provide us with the educational experiences needed to develop our skills to their fullest. The second limiting factor of on-the-job learning is that in general we are an isolated profession. We are isolated in the sense that it is not unusual for a librarian working in a North Carolina library to be the only librarian around. When there are other librarians around, it isn't unusual for one to be the only librarian devoted to an area of expertise. For example, a person may be the only children's librarian, the only reference librarian, the only technical services librarian or the only library administrator. Both of these factors limit the amount of learning that a new or experienced librarian can gather from his/her job.

### **Why They Didn't Teach You That in Library School**

Library schools are limited in the sense that they cannot provide an individual with all the training needed to be a successful practicing professional librarian. The main factor that restricts library schools from doing this is the fact that our profession is one that is learned by doing. For librarians, experience may not be the best teacher, but experience certainly is a major teacher.

Our day-to-day practice, however, is limited in that it lacks one of library school's main advantages. On-the-job learning lacks the structured environment that is a major component of effective learning. This, coupled with the relative isolation in which large numbers of practicing librarians work, limits on-the-job learning in its ability to provide the learning needed to become a professional librarian.

Continuing library education bridges the gap between library school and on-the-job learning. It is through continuing library education that we attempt to neaten the messy blending of library school theory with on-the-job practice. Through the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program, the library education programs of North Carolina have become vital and active partners with other continuing library education providers

in assisting North Carolina's librarians in perfecting their practice.

### **The North Carolina Library Staff Development Program: Erasing the Limits of Library School**

Continuing library education developed as a result of the natural limitations of library school and on-the-job learning. During 1982, Joan Wright, assistant professor of adult and community college education, North Carolina State University, and Douglas Zweig, assistant professor of library science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, conducted a comprehensive study of continuing library education in North Carolina. A total of 47 continuing education providers, 1,032 employed library staff members, and 47 library trustees were involved in the study<sup>1</sup>. The result of this study was a comprehensive picture of the continuing library education services then available to North Carolina librarians and the areas in which new or additional services were needed. The most significant finding of the study, in the context of this article, was that "Ideally, future development of continuing library education should be characterized by direct planning interaction between consumers of an educational opportunity and its providers."<sup>2</sup>

The Wright and Zweig study identified four major types of continuing library education providers. This study showed that library schools, professional associations, state agencies, and support groups were all involved in providing continuing library education in North Carolina. None of these providers, however, had continuing education as their major focus.

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## **On-the-job learning lacks the structured environment that is a major component of effective learning.**

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In January 1985, Benjamin Speller, of North Carolina Central University's School of Library and Information Sciences, developed a proposal to implement a continuing library education program that would act on several of the recommendations of the Wright and Zweig study. The program contained in Dr. Speller's proposal would involve direct planning between providers and consumers, place continuing library education events at geographically convenient locations across the state, and attempt to bridge the gap between library school and on-the-job experience.

This proposal was submitted to the Division of State Library and was funded using Library Services and Construction Act, Title III funds. The NCCU/School of Library and Information Science's Office of Continuing Education and Library Staff Development began operation on July 1, 1985, with me, a prodigal son recently returned from Georgia, as its coordinator. During the program's first year of operation, it provided 40 continuing library education events and reached approximately 800 participants.

During the spring of 1986, the Office of Continuing Education and Library Staff Development became the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program. This program is a cooperative continuing education effort of Appalachian State University's Department of Library Science and Educational Foundations, East Carolina University's Department of Library and Information Science, North Carolina Central University's School of Library and Information Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Library Science, and University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Library Science-Educational Technology Department. The North Carolina Library Staff Development Program continues to operate under the policies that governed the Office of Continuing Education and Library Staff Development. The same Advisory Council, composed of practicing librarians and continuing library education providers, continues to provide input into the program's offerings and operation.

The purpose of the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program is to provide a coordinated, comprehensive continuing library education program for the state of North Carolina. During its second year of operation the program has continued to grow, its coordinator has continued to learn, and new opportunities have continued to present themselves. During its second year of operation, the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program has offered 55 programs and reached an audience of approximately 1,400 participants.

A major success of this program has been its ability to bridge the gap between library school and on-the-job practice. Through programs such as the Branch Managers' Workshop, the Bookmobile Workshop, and High-Touch/High-Tech, the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program is providing an opportunity for librarians in specific areas and specialties to continue their professional growth and development.

The North Carolina Library Staff Development Program, like the individuals it serves, has to continue its own growth and development.

While the program has offered continuing library education events as far east as Kinston and as far west as Newton, two major sections of the state remain largely unserved. If the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program is to become a truly statewide program, it must begin offering services in the western, mountain area of the state and the northeastern coastal plain. The program also needs to diversify its offerings to serve librarians working in all types of libraries.

The North Carolina Library Staff Development Program has done a good job of serving public librarians in North Carolina. During its second year of operation this program has also made significant progress in serving librarians in academic, community college, and special libraries. If the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program is to become a truly comprehensive continuing library education program, it will have to expand its offerings to attract a larger portion of non-public librarians, especially school media center personnel, to its continuing library education events.

During its third year of operation, the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program intends to address the concerns outlined above and to embark on a comprehensive evaluation of the services it provides, the impact of those services on library service in North Carolina, and a more direct approach to identifying potential continuing library education needs. Through implementing this combined program evaluation and planning process, the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program will continue to bridge the gap between library school and on-the-job experience.

#### References

1. Joan Wright and D. Zweig. *A Study of Continuing Library Education in North Carolina*. North Carolina State University: Raleigh, 1982. p. 1.
2. Ibid. p. 109.





**NOMINATION FOR THE 1988 ROTHROCK AWARD  
SOUTHEASTERN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION**

**Award:** Interest on the \$10,000 endowment of Mary U. Rothrock and Honorary Membership in the Southeastern Library Association.

**Purpose:** To recognize outstanding contributions to librarianship in the Southeast. This is the highest honor bestowed by SELA on leaders in the library field.

**Guidelines:**

1. Age and years of service are not a deciding factor in the selection. Those librarians early in their careers or of many years service who have made an exceptional contribution to the field may be considered.
2. The award will be made to no more than one person in a biennium, and an award may be omitted if no suitable nomination is received.
3. Service in one or more states of those served by the Southeastern Library Association will qualify a person for nomination.
4. Please send your nominee's name, along with a narrative of his or her professional and association activities, civic organizations, writings, editorial contributions, single events or other honors received. Additional documentation may be requested in the case of finalists.

Those making nomination must be members of SELA, but the nominee need not be.

**Send all Nominations accompanied by a copy of this form to:**

Dean Burgess: Chair  
Rothrock Awards Committee of the Southeastern Library Association  
Portsmouth Public Library  
601 Court Street  
Portsmouth, VA 23704

*NOMINATIONS MUST BE RECEIVED BY JANUARY 2, 1988 (Please type or print carefully)*

Person nominated \_\_\_\_\_  
(First Name) (Middle Name or Initial) (Last Name)

States in which the nominee has served \_\_\_\_\_

SELA member making the nomination \_\_\_\_\_ (Signature)

Address of the member making the nomination

Address of the nominee (if known)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, and Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

City, State and Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Please print or type the reason for this nomination on an attached sheet. Copies of biographical data, articles about the nominee or other documents in support of a nomination are welcomed.