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What Do We Do and Why Do We Do It?

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What do we do and why do we do it?

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In Brief: The library community should develop a philosophy of librarianship. In order to do so the community should engage in a dialogue about what we do and why we do it. Our history with the idea of a philosophy of librarianship is long, yet the library community hasn't resolved the problem of what that philosophy (or philosophies) should be. Engaging in a reflective and philosophically-based practice of librarianship (a praxis of librarianship), one that frames decision-making and library work with the question: "what we do and why we do it?" will enable the library community to have successful conversations with those they serve. As a result, librarians will be invited to participate in important community decision-making efforts, and be able to further impact communities.
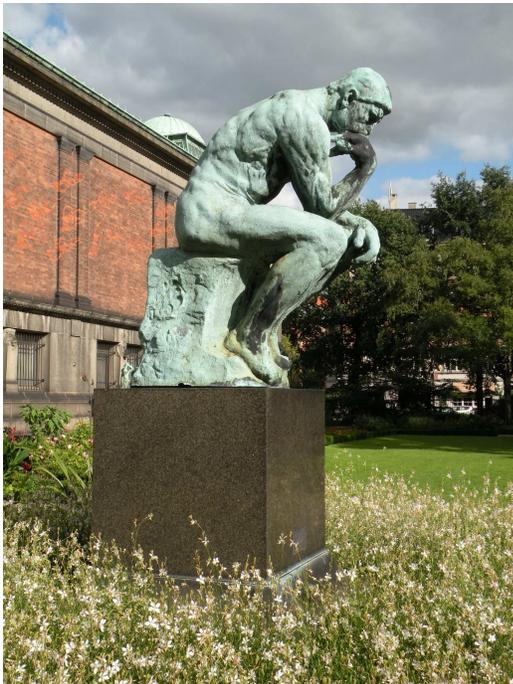

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Introduction

It was a Big Deal. School librarians, in particular, were furious. When the *New York Times* published the article, Wasting Time is New Divide in Digital Era, listservs, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter lit up with librarians' wrath. There was outcry and anger and hurt. The news was out that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was going to spend $200 million dollars to create a "digital literacy corps" in the form of a project called Connect2Compete.

Media Specialist Fran Bullington (2012) posted the following on her blog, Informania:

"Looks like the FCC has no idea that our schools have a ready-made "digital literacy corps" in place.

Chairman Julius Genachowski was quoted in the article. He recognizes the importance of digital

literacy, but he is ill-informed. He does not know that there are already trained professionals in many schools who work, against great odds at times, to train our students and who volunteer to teach parents these skills.

Let's not let him claim ignorance before spending this money."

Unfortunately, discussions such as this are not unique. Librarians are constantly explaining what they do (and what they can do) to their communities.[1]

Discussions similar to those surrounding the FCC debacle present themselves in small communities, within institutions, county and city governments. Librarians are absent from the table during important discussions when their expertise could be used. It's possible that librarians don't put themselves at the table, or institutions like the FCC don't think to invite librarians to participate. In the end the result is the same. Librarians have lower visibility and powerful decisions are made without librarians. These decisions could be improved with librarian input from the get go.

More and more, public discussions regarding libraries and librarians have surfaced into the public sphere. Each time there is a ballot measure, each time budgets are slashed, each time librarians lose jobs, the library community must articulate its value, to prove that it is worth current investment, and to fight for greater financial and social investments in the future. The cuts keep happening in institutional, city, and county budgets. Libraries and schools lose valuable professionals, or are made to deal with budgets that have gone from bad to worse. In this environment, libraries, librarians, and their advocates are faced with tracking, documenting, substantiating, and articulating their value.

Value has been a hot topic for libraries for a while. In 2010, ACRL published LIS professor Megan Oakleaf's study *The Value of Academic Libraries*, which outlined recommendations for academic libraries and librarians to further perceptions of value. These recommendations, by and large, focus on gathering data via assessment to track and show evidence of academic libraries' value to their communities.

Similarly, the American Library Association's Council recently passed a resolution in support of school libraries. Typical of value statements and documents, the resolution discusses evidence that school libraries and librarians have positive effects on student learning. For school librarians in Beaverton, Oregon, this resolution and the numerous discussions with the school board did not work; every teacher librarian has been cut from the district. Another example of value failing was published in *Working Together: Evolving value for academic libraries*, a SAGE study released in June that "found no systematic evidence of the value of academic libraries for teaching and research staff" (Creaser & Spezi, 2012, p. 1).

Despite the talk about value and impact, despite the resolutions and reports, jobs are getting cut, the FCC is working on Connect2Compete with some (but in many people's opinions not enough) involvement by libraries, and librarians, and library advocates are left to assert what we do and what impacts we make until we are blue in the face. Either we are too busy 'articulating our value' to ourselves and not enough to external stakeholders, or our messages aren't compelling enough to get results.

My aim here is not to contribute to the groundswell of victim rhetoric that surrounds the de-funding and de-professionalization of librarianship. Instead, I aim to shine a light on what I think is happening. Namely, we haven't yet sussed out the philosophy behind what it is that we do.

Our conversations aren't working because our language isn't working. Our language isn't working because our day-to-day thinking isn't working. We should be engaging in a different conversation with ourselves and our community of library workers. We should individually and collectively reflect on the question: What do we do and why do we do it?

When we're able to successfully engage in this dialogue we will be able to transform our practice of librarianship into a *praxis*[2] of librarianship. As a result, our conversations with external stakeholders will include deeper meaning and will have greater impact on our communities.

In the rest of this article I will discuss historical and current conversations regarding what we do and why we do it. Then I will discuss our problems with language and make a case for how and why librarians should develop a praxis of librarianship.

A Philosophy of Librarianship

So how did we get to this crossroads? We currently communicate with our communities in a rapidly evolving information landscape. This landscape further necessitates our external conversations to focus on what librarians bring to their communities and the impacts we have on them. Despite the current tenor of these conversations, our internal dialogue regarding the philosophy of librarianship (i.e. what do we do and why do we do it) is not new. It goes back to the early 1900s, and possibly earlier.[3]

In 1934, James Periam Danton published "A Plea for a Philosophy of Librarianship" in *The Library Quarterly,* in which the author asks that librarians engage in philosophical exercise to the end of creating a philosophy of life and subsequently, a philosophy of librarianship. Many of Danton's readers, and certainly *Lead Pipe* readers, may argue that S.R. Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science* addresses a philosophy of librarianship. However, Danton dismisses this seminal work:

> "But this treatise, as stimulating and interesting as it undoubtedly is, does not attempt to define the functions of library activity on any other basis than that of present-day good library service; the discussion is not an open-minded enquiry into the validity of functions and activities. Most of it is, furthermore, limited to public-library work." (p. 532)

Danton concludes that any philosophy of librarianship should and must be "derived from the predominating ideals of that society. Consequently, before a library philosophy can be formulated, there must be an understanding and recognition of the ideals and purposes of the society into which that philosophy must fit" (p. 547). Although Danton did not himself offer any concrete philosophy, he asserted that any philosophy of librarianship would be a social philosophy that ties the library to its roots in democratic society.

This conversation has continued throughout *The Library Quarterly's* publication history. More recently, in the late 1990s, another conversation regarding philosophy emerged. In his article, "We Don't Need a Philosophy of Library and Information Science: We're Confused Enough Already," Jim Zwadlo (1997) addressed contemporary LIS literature in which positivism and reductionism were framed as a troublesome foundations for and practices of library science methods. In response, Gary Radford and John Budd (1997) reflected on Zwadlo's assertions, concluding their comments with: "…we loudly advocate that we do need a philosophy of library and information science; we are not confused enough!" (p. 321).

Zwadlo (1998) responded, slinging around concepts of positivism and epistemology. "Do Radford and Budd want to replace positivism with another philosophy? Or do they want us to see all philosophies as useful, as all having something to offer? Perhaps we are quibbling over the term 'alternative' and do not really disagree" (p. 115).

Even ten years later (in 2008), when Dr. Robert Labaree (Head of the USC Von KleinSmid center Library for International and Public Affairs) and Ross Scimeca (Head of the USC Hoose Philosophy Library) published "The Philosophical Problem of Truth in Librarianship" the discussion continued. Right on the heels of this publication, in 2009, came Library Juice Press's release of Andre Cossette's 1976 French essay, *Humanism and Libraries: An Essay on the Philosophy of Librarianship.* In his introduction, translator, publisher and librarian Rory Litwin addresses potential reader questions such as "Why should American librarians be interested in a philosophical treatment of the foundations of the profession…?" (p. ix).

Litwin explains:

> "Sound ideas about what librarianship is and what its goals are permit us to claim a degree of autonomy in institutions where we might otherwise serve as mere functionaries rather than as the professionals we are. Without a philosophical foundation, we lack a basis for making decisions regarding how to change our institutions in response to external forces, with the potential result that we do not play the role that we should in decision-making." (p. ix-x).
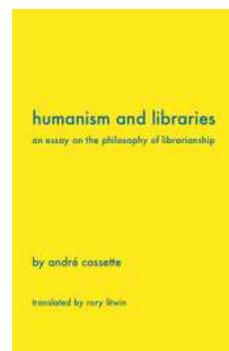
This explanation mirrors the arguments outlined by Danton, Cossette, Budd, Labaree and Scimeca. At the risk of overgeneralizing, each of these authors point to philosophy as a practice that allows for

external recognition of the library's role in society and institutions, strengthens the esteem of librarians and the profession, and encourages a reflective and intentional practice of librarianship.

Despite this 80+ year old conversation, and the seeming agreement as to why and how a philosophy of librarianship would serve the profession, librarians and librarianship do not coalesce around a philosophy of librarianship. And perhaps this is not without good reason.

Our Librarian Identity Crises

We continue to struggle with the philosophy of librarianship in the 21st century even though the idea permeates our profession's history. In the recent past, numerous individual librarians have written to grapple with what we do and who we are. A good example is Lane Wilkinson, an academic librarian with a Master's in Philosophy, who asked (and answered) whether librarians were experts in a two-part blog post series over at Sense and Reference. In the day and age when technological advancement has challenged how we perceive what librarians do, we seem to be asking: What is a librarian?[4]

One of the problems that we face when it comes to finding a philosophy of librarianship, and likewise articulating our impact to communities, is that the umbrella of librarianship is gigantic. *Librarian*. When you begin to think about it, the word doesn't mean anything, because it means too many things. Librarians are teachers and collectors and advocates and searchers and researchers and… Sound familiar?

In 2010 *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* published a slew of articles that discussed what we do. In June 2010 Kim Leeder, fellow co-founder, editor, and author for *Lead Pipe* was searching for her identity and the "real work" of librarianship. Following Kim's article, Char Booth, librarian, blogger, and author, argued that librarians are shapeshifters who can show up opportunistically to be on the periphery of communities and conversations, and I lamented losing my librarian mojo.

In contrast to Booth, Cossette argued that librarians should frame themselves outside of the paradigm of our overarching institutions. He did not see librarians as educators or teachers, nor did he see them as scientists, but simply as Librarians. Furthering his argument, he points to the need for "librarian" to be defined and for the purpose or aim of libraries to be outlined.

In 2009 John Blyberg, Cindi Trainor, and Kathryn Greenhill (all three library workers and bloggers) composed and endorsed *The Darien Statements on the Library and Librarians.* These statements are an attempt to get at the bigger picture identity of the library and librarians; a potential answer to the question, "What do we do and what do we value?" *The Statements* outline the purpose of the library, in addition to outlining the role of the librarian within that purpose. Like Cossette, *The Darien Statements* point to the possible (and arguably, inherent) tension between libraries and the institutions or organizations in which they may be housed, although they do not go so far as to assert that the library is the same with or without an institution. "Individual libraries serve the mission of their parent institution or governing body, but the purpose of the Library overrides that mission when the two come into conflict." Moreover, *The Darien Statements* aptly outline the purpose of the library, and separates the roles that libraries and librarians play in this paradigm.

There is certainly no lack of evidence that librarians are grappling with these questions. Another example is David Rothman's 2011 manifesto, *Common Sense Librarianship*, wherein he discusses some basic qualities of information professionals. "The most important qualities an information professional can possess are adaptability, resourcefulness, a habit of looking for better/easier/more efficient ways to do things, creativity, and a love for solving problems." Further, Rothman states that librarians should: "…adapt rather than perish" and "Information professionals should be champions of clarity and concision who find accessible ways to describe complex topics."

Most recently, R. David Lankes, LIS Professor and library futurist, published *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (2011) wherein he created a knowledge map of the profession, placing the Mission of librarians at the center. "The mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities" (p. 13). Lankes argues that it is not a building that makes a library a library, but it is a Librarian that makes a library. "I have long contended that a room full of books is simply a closet but that an empty room with a librarian in it is a library" (p. 16). Lankes' mission and resulting worldview of new librarianship enables librarians to create new social compacts with their communities, Lankes argues. It is these social compacts (that communities support

librarians as long as librarians hold up their part of the bargain: to improve society by facilitating knowledge creation in their communities) that enable librarians and libraries to have meaningful conversations about the impacts and value they bring to their communities.

While Cossette offers definitions and aims for librarianship, contemporary works such as *The Darien Statements* and *The Atlas of New Librarianship* are more applicable for a current understanding and introspective practices of librarianship.

As evidenced by this handful of examples, the library profession is lacking consistent thinking and messaging about what it is that we do and who we are. Some definitions such as *The Darien Statements* spell out the mission of both the library and librarians, whereas others are concerned mostly with the Librarian.

It's a Language Problem: Value vs. Philosophy

The language problems don't end or begin with questions of the Librarian. There exists a complex disconnect in language between libraries, librarians, and librarianship. This becomes further complicated when we discuss the **value** of libraries and librarians. One need only think back to conversations about "articulating value" and be reminded of documents such as the *Value of Academic Libraries* report or ALA resolution I mentioned earlier. We've been trying for so long to discuss our value that the philosophy of librarianship hasn't entered into discussions about our impact on communities.

We struggle with the difference between value and philosophy, so I think it is important to analyze, ever briefly, the differences. A basic philological investigation helps. *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers a good definition of philosophy: "The study of the general principles of a particular subject, phenomenon, or field of inquiry" (OED Online, 2012).

Definitions of "value," on the other hand, discusses the worth, sum, or merit of work. It is inherently quantifiable, assessable, and deliverable. Whereas, "values," (with an S) insinuates "principles or moral standards."

Naturally, questions of philosophy delve deeper into meaning than the question of what value libraries bring to communities and what are librarianship's shared principles. Rather, the word "philosophy" implies that one engages in introspection, quiet study, and open discourse. It is about periodically examining why it is that we do what we do.

Similar to this measurable vs. questioning stance, Cossette examines measurable science versus the introspective philosophy. Basing his questioning in Danton's claims, Cossette approaches this question as Science vs. Philosophy (p. 7). He stresses that where science answers the "how," philosophy answers the "why." Why librarians?

In *The Value of Academic Libraries* Megan Oakleaf (2010) suggests that librarians "…need to collect new and different data" (p. 95) in addition to gathering existing data. She further develops this argument, showcasing how librarians might capture new data using existing products or developing new data collection products (pp. 95-96). In essence, the document itself points to how academic libraries and the librarians within them support their institutions. Any philosophical question framed in the document, returns to the question of how, rather than why. Concluding the report's short section on "Societal Contribution" Oakleaf writes:

> "Academic library contributions to society have not been widely identified or researched. However, once librarians know more about how they contribute to the primary areas of institutional missions—learning, research, and service—they can use the lessons they learn to assess the societal value of those contributions." (p. 56).

Oakleaf herself shows our weakness—the lack of research or identification of our societal contributions. In essence, she demonstrates that the "why" hasn't been adequately addressed.

This tension between the how and why is difficult. While funders may want to hear numbers and facts, would not a story about why we loan materials, teach digital literacy skills, or facilitate conversations in communities not have the same effect? How can we enhance the numbers with

more robust language that speaks to why we do what we do?

It's a Language Problem: Messaging and Catchphrases

Librarians don't have a catchphrase, or not a good one, anyway. Doctors abide by the Hippocratic Oath: "first do no harm." Police Officers "protect and serve." These are universally identifiable phrases affiliated with the identity, purpose, and underlying philosophy of two very disparate professions. These are oaths or statements of practice, which are discrete and recognizable by the public at large. Herein lays the problem for librarians. What succinct and meaningful phrase do we have that will resonate with the public at large?

It's not for lack of attempt, however. Cossette outlined the following: "Librarianship is the art and science of the acquisition, preservation, organization, and retrieval of written and audiovisual records with the aim of assuring a maximum of information access for the human community." (p. 33). But I can't imagine that this definition resonates with anyone outside of librarianship. Similarly, values statements such as the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom's Core Values of Librarianship, *The Darien Statements*, ALA's Library Bill of Rights, ALA's Motto: "The best reading, for the largest number, at the least cost,"[5] and other 'why librarians are important' documents have not been able to make meaning for the public at large of librarians' purpose and role in society.

We're good at talking to one another and knowing what each other is saying. We have terms like *information literacy*, *resource description*, and *information retrieval*. But we can't expect the general public to have a clue what any of those aforementioned phrases mean.

I don't know that there is a good motto. At best, the catchphrases and mottos that we can craft are nebulous in meaning. At the 2012 Annual Oregon Library Association Conference, a colleague and I led a book discussion of Cossette's work. In the discussion we tried to define a mission or motto for librarianship. Here's what we came up with: "Librarians are facilitating for everyone the lifelong development and experience of human knowledge, culture, and discourse" (Participants of *Humanism & Libraries: A book discussion*, personal communication, April 27, 2012).

So how do we get the language to work? How do we work toward cohesive, clear, and succinct messaging to the public? I don't think we can yet. We haven't collectively been doing enough of the work to get there. Before we can begin to craft meaningful statements, we will need to continue to engage with the study of our profession philosophically. We will need to understand our personal practice of librarianship so that we can, in turn, translate it into meaningful conversations with our communities.

Librarianship is a Multi-faceted Profession

Zwadlo was right, we are incredibly confused. He asserted that confusion could be harnessed as a useful way to get things done—that confusion can aid librarians in creative thinking and problem solving. And I'm not sure that, despite many authors who are in agreement regarding the need for a philosophy, coming up with one unified philosophy of librarianship will ultimately serve the profession.

The fact is the breadth of librarianship is so vast that one unified philosophy couldn't possibly capture the enormity of impact we bring our communities. Our umbrella is just too big and our communities too diverse. Cossette also points to the vast array of work librarians perform, from serving within elementary and higher educational institutions, to public libraries, archives, and preservation of human knowledge.[6]

So if finding and agreeing upon one unified philosophy of librarianship poses so many challenges, what can we do instead?

From Practice to Praxis

Instead of searching for a unified philosophy of librarianship, we should move from having a practice

of librarianship to a praxis of librarianship.

In our long history of debate regarding a philosophy of librarianship, there are common threads in the discussion. From Danton in 1934 to Lankes in 2011 it is clear that librarianship should be a reflective and intentional practice.

"The philosophy of librarianship, then, is the theoretical integration of library practice as a unity, the encompassing understanding of the meaning of the profession. Through a method that is at once critical and reflective, it attempts to form a synthetic whole out of the disparate facets of librarianship to better direct its application." (Cossette, p. 9).

Thank you, Gerald Stolk, for licensing your Flickr images with creative commons licenses.

To cultivate praxis is to remain curious about our practice and engage with it. It is to want to know internally and externally what is changing and what is steadfast in our profession. It is to think critically about our greater purpose and current goals when we make decisions. Praxis brings philosophical underpinnings to our daily routines and professional decision-making.

On a day-to-day level moving from practice to praxis will mean a shift in thinking. For example, during discussions and decision-making processes we may consider moving from one vendor to another. In practice we may choose to partner with a vendor whose pricing better reflects our budgetary constraints. In *praxis*, we may choose to partner with a vendor whose mission better aligns with our own, despite higher pricing. This seems simple enough. However, praxis manifests in the process of decision-making, not in the end result. To come to this decision, this fictional team of librarians had to weigh their options through a critical lens. They did not ask themselves, "What is our budgetary bottom line?" Instead, they asked themselves, "how will this decision/vendor align with our mission and goals?" Had these librarians not critically engaged with **why** they do what they do, they most likely would have partnered with a vendor with lower pricing.

When every library worker engages daily with the question, "what do I do and why do I do it?" we will be better situated to have meaningful conversations with one another. We will be able to better articulate amongst ourselves our goals and our missions. We will have a deeper understanding of the societal benefit we provide and we will better position ourselves when external conversations occur. Maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to find common ground for a motto or phrase that perfectly identifies what it is that we do and why we do it.

A praxis of librarianship should be a daily and meditative exercise interwoven with our reference work, collection development, programming, teaching, and research. It is a way of being.

Conclusion

So why is the FCC putting so much money toward a Digital Literacy Corps without enough involvement from the library community? Because we don't have the tradition of being engaged in a philosophical praxis of librarianship. Having a habit of thinking deeply and critically about what it is that we do and why we do it, on a large scale, would enable and empower us to create good language and hopefully, in turn, to influence on a large scale the perception and understanding of librarians' value to and impact on society.

Repeatedly explaining librarians' functions in society is a death march. According to Lankes, "Over time, functional views don't and can't capture the dynamic nature of the world. What's more, they tend to lead to stagnation and the inability to adapt" (p. 21). Instead of having conversations about librarians' function and value, we should have conversations about the why. Why we do what we do. Why, from a philosophical viewpoint, our work matters.

A first step in responding to any "crisis" or challenge in the profession—such as the FCC's project that only nominally notices librarians; the issue of ebooks that Brett Bonfield, *Lead Pipe* co-founder and author so wonderfully discussed in The Ebook Cargo Cult; the elimination of budgets and jobs and de-professionalization that occurs with retirements—is to engage in a praxis of librarianship. As Lankes (2011) argues "…the very definition of our field, its perception, and its ultimate effect are in the hands of librarians–our hands" (p. 1). All library workers should be engaged in a praxis of

librarianship. And it's never too late to start.

The heavy lifting for this has already been done. Lankes's *Atlas*, *The Darien Statements,* articles written by scholars in librarianship in the 1930s through to today, have lent themselves to a rich discourse on philosophy. If you haven't engaged with philosophy, if your library practice hasn't crossed the bridge from practice to praxis, read *The Darien Statements*. Read *The Atlas of New Librarianship.* Begin your praxis of librarianship from these standpoints. And begin to reflect. Every day.

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1. Among numerous examples see: Sass, R.K. (2002). Marketing the Worth of Your Library. *Library Journal.* Retrieved August 3, 2012 from: http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA220888.html [↵]
2. The Oxford English Dictionary defines praxis as: "b. Conscious, willed action, esp. (in Marxist and neo-Marxist thought) that through which theory or philosophy is transformed into practical social activity; the synthesis of theory and practice seen as a basis for or condition of political and economic change. Also: an instance of this; the application of a theory or philosophy to a practical political, social, etc., activity or programme." (OED Online, 2012). [↵]
3. While this may seem quite recent, remember that the first library school was created by Melvil Dewey in the late 1800s. Prior to this time, librarianship was a learned craft, with no one unified curriculum. ALA began accrediting schools of library science in 1925. [↵]
4. And as one of my peer-reviewers asked: "Or, is a librarian still a librarian?" [↵]
5. <rant>This motto is terrible! Is all that ALA, librarians, and libraries do in support of reading? </rant> [↵]
6. See *Humanism & Libraries* chapter 4, "The Ultimate Aims of Libraries" for this discussion. [↵]

Comments Disabled To "What do we do and why do we do it?"

#1 Pingback By Libraries and Public Service « Hack Library School On August 8, 2012 @ 8:09 am

[...] interested in a more philosophical, metadisciplinary discussion of librarianship, please check out Emily Ford's new article "What do we do and why do we do it?", a thoughtful argument for why librarians need to take a step back to articulate a philosophy of [...]

#2 Comment By Emily On August 8, 2012 @ 9:54 am

TOTALLY interesting conversation, Emily! I'm not sure we need a unified theory as much as we need a unified agreement that we ought to *have* some theories, and an acknowledgement that our work comes out of those theories whether we know it/make it explicit to ourselves or not. For instruction folks, I think Heidi Jacobs writes great stuff about the importance of reflective practice, and her chapter on Wikipedia in Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods is a good example of how practice is influenced by theory–if you think truth emerges only out of conflict and is temporary and contextual, you might teach reference research differently than someone who believes it's possible to find the right answer.

#3 Comment By Kenley Neufeld On August 8, 2012 @ 11:02 am

Great conversation and exploration (as usual from Lead). Thank you for the effort bringing the varied thought together on this idea of philosophy. In your conclusion, I was struck by the line

Repeatedly explaining librarians' functions in society is a death march.

. It leaves me pondering and wishing I explore further.

#4 Comment By Michele On August 8, 2012 @ 11:09 am

Great piece! Thanks for writing this!
I actually do think many librarians are engaged in a philosophical praxis of librarianship. However, it comes in the form of blogs, websites, etc. where the conversation has not been centralized. We have the ability to state our thoughts and opinions to the world and to each other about the things that we deal with on a day to day basis. Having personal platforms allows us to wax poetic, as well as philosophical, about librarianship; Reading presentations and stories online of librarians in real-time gives me this impression – and I gobble it up! The downside is that I need to search for it if I'm not already subscribed to a blog or following someone. Having these conversation centralized, or organized (we are librarians after all), might naturally create what could become the updated philosophy of librarianship. (I have absolutely no idea how this could even be possible, given the amount of library-related information out there, so this is more of a comment than a question!)

#5 Pingback By Library Juice » Emily Ford on Library Philosophy On August 8, 2012 @ 12:02 pm

[...] Ford does a great job with this overview of library philosophy in In the Library With a Lead Pipe: What We Do and Why We Do It, published this morning. Much of it is a review of the literature in this important thread of LIS [...]

#6 Comment By Audrey On August 8, 2012 @ 2:41 pm

I wanted to share an article – Libraries Build Autonomy: A Philosophical Perspective on the Social Role of Libraries and Librarians (http://unllib.unl.edu/LPP/barbakoff.htm) Disclaimer – I'm the author.

I wrote on this topic in 2010, suggesting a particular philosophical perspective for libraries – namely, the building of autonomy in our patrons. (It's a little philosophy-nerdy, just a warning!) I don't mean to self-promote – I just wanted to share that there are more of us thinking about this issue, and hopefully provide an example or spark some ideas for others who want to construct their own argument for a particular philosophy of librarianship.

#7 Comment By Erica Findley On August 8, 2012 @ 5:21 pm

Thanks for writing this! When I think of why we do what we do, I can't but help to think about when I decided to become a librarian. I know this isn't semantically perfect, but I came up with it before

library school, before a library job, and before I knew any library jargon. I became a librarian so that I could contribute to people's life in a positive way by helping them connect with information they needed. I remind myself of this all the time when I see bad news for libraries/librarians.

#8 Comment By <u>StevenB</u> On August 8, 2012 @ 9:43 pm

Hi Emily. I'll just add two things to a good conversation. I have found the book Start With Why to be of some help in understanding the importance of putting the why before the what or how of what you do. I tried to share some of my thoughts about it in this column <u>http://bit.ly/rVk6Y6</u> – on the need to perhaps understand and express your personal why – before you can move on the why of the profession – and the connection between the two. Not exactly a statement of philosophy, but more of a reflection on why academic librarians are passionate about their work (or should be) – <u>http://bit.ly/NetwNh</u> – I was trying to articulate more of a personal philosophy on the why of academic librarianship – mostly about building relationships and making a difference in them.

#9 Comment By <u>Emily Ford</u> On August 8, 2012 @ 10:24 pm

Wow, thanks, Emily. Lankes points to some theories that are really interesting in the *Atlas of New Librarianship*–specifically conversation theory. That, in itself is interesting in that it can talk about how we interact externally AND internally.

Thanks for recommending the chapter by Heidi Jacobs, I'm going to go check it out.

#10 Comment By <u>Emily Ford</u> On August 8, 2012 @ 10:25 pm

Thanks, Kenley. What exactly struck you about that sentence? As I think about it now, I'm wondering if it's too negative. I guess I was trying to get out that we need to be flexible about our function.

#11 Comment By <u>Emily Ford</u> On August 8, 2012 @ 10:28 pm

This is a really interesting perspective, Michele. I think you are right, that many people are engaged in a praxis of librarianship. I guess I wonder if we're talking to each other about it enough. As you point out, we can put our thoughts out there, but how do we know there will be a response? Or adoption? Or further ideas created?

Thanks for chiming in.

#12 Comment By <u>Emily Ford</u> On August 8, 2012 @ 10:38 pm

Audrey, I'm so glad you shared this. I'm still absorbing your ideas. I like the idea of autonomy, and I especially like that you are borrowing from feminist tradition, but I am still not quite sure how I feel about seeing myself as a "caretaker." To me that sounds too paternalistic/maternalistic of a view.

I also want to engage more with the idea of librarianship being tied to a "moral" stance. That is also a loaded term. And for me, not loaded in a good way.

I'm going to chew on these ideas that you've proposed. Autonomy definitely gets mentioned by Cossette and others, but they certainly don't approach it in the same way that you do.

Thanks for sharing– this is really good stuff that I'm going to be thinking about for weeks to come.

#13 Comment By <u>Emily Ford</u> On August 8, 2012 @ 10:41 pm

Me, too, Erica. I bring myself back to these thoughts with regularity. I guess I've had some

interactions in the past with individuals who didn't really have compelling reasons to go to library school (and I'm not saying they should have).

This kind of reflection about the mission/vision/philosophy/praxis of librarianship could certainly be better reflected in LIS education. But I digress…

#14 Comment By Emily Ford On August 8, 2012 @ 11:01 pm

Thanks for sharing all of these, Steven. And to what you said in the LJ column about the WHY, I say, "yes!" And to passion I say, "yes!" I love that so many people have already articulated their whys and that we are coming together to talk about it.

Maybe I wrote the wrong article. Maybe I should have written an article that, instead of calling for praxis of librarianship, called for the identification or creation of a platform for us all to share these ideas. (See Michele's comment above where where mentioned that she thought we were already doing this, but finding out what others think can be time consuming and is not centralized.)

Finally, your two articles have made me think more seriously about following up today's article with one entitled "My Praxis of Librarianship," wherein I ruminate about my why.

Thanks again, Steven, for commenting and sharing your own thoughts. (And I'll definitely be borrowing *Start with Why* from my library.)

#15 Comment By Jonesy On August 9, 2012 @ 8:49 am

Problems with this approach: 1. It assumes no change over time. 2. It assumes perfect information is obtained by a tiny subset of humanity. 3. It makes no provision for cultural diversity. 5. It makes no provision for evolutionary change. 4. It disregards the pragmatics of resource extraction and constraints.

I know it's unsatisfying to think of yourself as functionary, but that is our essence, as it is the essence of any institution that serves humanity – government, religion, education; all must bow before the will of the people. That is our philosophy: to do what our patrons demand. Whether they be a political body of the public, a single wealthy donor, or an organization requiring support for whatever their larger mission.

#16 Comment By Lori On August 9, 2012 @ 9:54 am

In library school Dr. David Kaiser taught me that the role of libraries is to "acquire, organize, preserve, and deliver the human record." That philosophy has always served me quite well.

#17 Comment By Ed Summers On August 9, 2012 @ 10:18 am

Thanks for this overview, I hadn't heard of the *Darien Statements* and the *Atlas of New Librarianship* before, and am now going to check them out.

I'm a librarian and have had a bit of a philosophical bent at times. So it was nice to see these two streams cross in your post.

I think it's seductive to think that there could be a unifying philosophy of librarianship, and that it could be summarized quickly. "The mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities" is probably one of the better ones I've ever seen.

But like you said it's more worth our while to focus on practice (or praxis) than seeking a precise notion of what librarianship is, and expecting it to help. For me, this is where I have found the work of pragmatist philosophers like Richard Rorty really helpful. For the pragmatists, the intrinsic truth of something like Librarianship is less important than what librarians do, and whether it is useful. Rorty specifically talks quite a bit about how this focus on the useful is intrinsically tied to social hope, which I think is an undercurrent to a lot of work that librarians do. There has been some writing by

Hjørland and Sundin on the topic of pragmatism and theories of librarianship. Rorty's Philosophy and Social Hope was the gateway drug for me. I imagine there are lots of other ways into it. Pragmatism has very American roots, and I'm an American, so it kind of speaks to me on that level too.

You said:

> Naturally, questions of philosophy delve deeper into meaning than the question of what value libraries bring to communities and what are librarianship's shared principles. Rather, the word "philosophy" implies that one engages in introspection, quiet study, and open discourse. It is about periodically examining why it is that we do what we do.

What I get from the pragmatists is that philosophical questions about what libraries necessarily need to be grounded in the value that they bring — there is nothing more important. If the FCC doesn't realize that libraries are helping educate people in how to use digital media, we need to show them how we are doing those things. This is absolutely about thinking about what we do, and measuring the effects of what we do, and making what we do better. Giving the FCC an elevator pitch of what libraries are so they remember us, or delving into the truth of libraries isn't going to help the cause of libraries.

#18 Comment By M. Bear On August 9, 2012 @ 12:31 pm

This is a very interesting article. :)

The position of justification and advocacy of libraries to local communities is a bit different than the advocacy of related to what went down with the FCC. In the former the individual library has to express itself to a local community and in the latter the question of advocacy of professional domain best expressed collectively via our professional organization.

In my view, it is fair to say that independent library blog writers seem to better at demonstrating credibility of the professional domain than our professional organization. This blog post is a fine example as are many other library related blogs and projects.

Our ethics trace out expectations of ethical behavior and I'm not too sure how developing a larger philosophical system beyond that would help.
I think this is mostly because the profession is in something of spiral of de-professionalization which not only robs us of our credibility but also seems to also subtract something substantive of our professional presence that goes beyond the return of investment in our communities.

By that I mean that we are respected in our communities be they academic or public, it when we look internally at ourselves we see problems of de-professionalization which is a separate issue of when other larger organizations looks at our organizational representation and fail to see the substance of what we do.

The reason we aren't at the table isn't for a lack of a systematic philosophical pretext. We aren't there because we don't have any institutional authority/political clout…or lots of money. What little institutional authority we have is derived from ALA and what little political clout we have comes from the prestige of working with a library.

We can't complain too much about a digital corps teaching people how to use computers instead of librarians because it is cheaper when libraries are the ones de-professionalizing the profession…even ALA plays with LSSI.

Internally we lost some ethical authority by having patron circulation move from something you needed a warrant to see to something companies can use to aggregate data, if there is a professional crisis it is one of self-definition in a world where we are forced to compromise our ethics to participate.

#19 Comment By Emily Ford On August 9, 2012 @ 1:19 pm

I'm so glad that you brought up these four points, Jonesy. I'd like to address them with some thoughts and questions.

On your first point, "It assumes no change over time," I heartily disagree. In fact, a previous draft of this article included a thought: "Philosophies are bound to change over time. As libraries and librarianship rapidly change, so, too, will philosophies of library science." One of my peer reviewers was really intrigued by this statement, and wanted to hear more. There would be no possible way for librarians to remain librarians, should they not be adaptable, flexible, and able to have their praxis of librarianship evolve over time.

Your second point, I'm not sure what you mean by "perfect information." Can you clarify what that means?

Third, I think that there is definite room for cultural diversity. After all, I did not argue that we find one philosophy of librarianship. Instead, I argued that we, individually, should come into a praxis– and in this sense praxis is individualized. However, what it also implies, is that by having a praxis, that we will also have conversations and engage in discourse with one another about individual praxis. In this flexibility, I can see where there is a lot of room for librarianship to engage with an array of cultures.

Regarding your fourth point, I hope that you could please explain a little more what you mean about resource extraction.

And to your fifth, see my response to your first.

I completely disagree that our philosophy is to do as our patrons demand. It seems quite a cynical view that librarians do what patrons demand. This has never been my personal take as to what it means and why I am a librarian. My stance is more related to feminism and social justice.

To complicate your assertions, I think you may also consider your points in terms of language. There is a difference between "library" and "librarian." While I could see an argument that libraries are functionaries, I disagree that librarians are mere functionaries in society.

I cannot support a view that Librarians and Librarianship are functionaries. Praxis is not an action taken by a library, it is a process undertaken by a librarian or library worker, which informs the manifestation of their work, librarianship.

Thank you for your challenging comments. They really got me thinking. I hope that you can further explain some of your points.

#20 Comment By Emily Ford On August 9, 2012 @ 1:22 pm

Thanks for pointing to this, Lori. That is a very functional view of libraries. As you will see in my response to the previous commentor, Jonesy, there is a difference in language and meaning between "library," "librarian," and "librarianship."

In the way that you have adopted the role of the library as your philosophy, it does not pay tribute to you as the librarian or the embodiment of your work, librarianship.

If you agree that libraries are different from librarians are different from librarianship, what would be your philosophy of librarianship?

#21 Comment By Emily Ford On August 9, 2012 @ 1:27 pm

I'll have to read Rorty's work. Have you read the Labaree and Scimeca article? They take a historicist view of truth in librarianship. I'm going to have to read the things you mention next to the Labaree and Scimeca and see what I think.

Here's the citation:

Labaree, R. V., & Scimeca, R. (2008). The Philosophical Problem of Truth in Librarianship. Library Quarterly (1), 43-70.

Thanks for commenting.

#22 Comment By Lane Wilkinson On August 9, 2012 @ 10:19 pm

Thanks for linking to my blog; it's an honor to be included in your post!

Personally, I'm not really interested in why we do what we do because I actually think we have a pretty good handle on it; most librarians agree more than disagree when it comes to professional values and purpose. The Darien statements, Lankes's mission, Rothman's common sense…all just variations on a theme: we help people get to the information they want and/or need for some purpose.

But, there are better and worse ways of realizing our values, so I'm more interested in *how* we do what we do. How should we organize information? How do patrons acquire knowledge? What is information in the first place? And so on. So, for example, I can agree with Lankes on a philosophy of librarianship: we facilitate knowledge creation. But the "how" of knowledge creation is a different sort of philosophy entirely. (I follow analytic philosophy, but there are also structuralists, constructionists, Marxists, and more.)

In short, I think we need both the value-oriented "philosophy of librarianship" that you discuss, as well as we need to apply the methodologies and concepts of formal philosophy to librarianship. To me, this means that we need to apply the concepts, theories, and methods of epistemology, metaphysics, logic, and value-theory to figure out how best to meet our purpose as librarians. A philosophy *of* librarianship is a worthwhile pursuit, but so is the pursuit of formal philosophy *within* librarianship.

[Also, in response to the last comment, Labaree and Scimeca's historicist theory of truth is incompatible with any philosophy of librarianship that includes knowledge or information as core concepts. And as to Rorty, I'll recommend *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Just keep in mind that Rorty is a pariah in most philosophical circles. Even the pragmatists want nothing to do with him.]

#23 Comment By Audrey On August 10, 2012 @ 2:21 am

Thanks! I see where you're coming from on the vocabulary choices. Mostly, I used them because that's the vocabulary being used in the literature I was reading/citing. I did mean caretaker simply as "one who provides care", though it's hard to say that in any way in our culture without some wonky connotations. (So interesting what that says about us …) As for "moral" – I mean that to be read as "something that generates an 'ought'" rather than "something Mitt Romney would say." But I don't think it messes up the argument much just to say "philosophical" instead of "moral".

I really enjoyed your article and am glad to see other people thinking about this issue!!

#24 Comment By Steve On August 10, 2012 @ 10:38 am

Cossette's explanation of librarianship philosophy is pure rhetoric. Our philosophy was explained by people like Madison and Carnegie. President Madison is quoted as stating; "A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." (*Not WHY?, But WHY! Libraries Are Needed)* Carnegie finished off the librarianship philosophy completely when he stated;

"There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library,…."

If providing free access to information is not philosophy enough for librarians, maybe they need to stop staring at their reflection and start working in a library with real people who have real needs that thousands of librarians satisfy every day.

#25 Pingback By Weekly Link RoundupLone Star Librarian | Lone Star Librarian On August 10, 2012 @ 6:22 pm

[…] In the Library with the Lead Pipe » What do we do and why do we do it? […]

#26 Pingback By Why Libraries Are Needed! – Revisited | 21st Century Library Blog On August 13, 2012 @ 1:10 am

[…] With the latest buzz over Emily Ford's In the Library with the Lead Pipe Blog post "What do we do and why do we do it?" last Wednesday, and Jacob Berg's "BeerBrarian Blog" commentary response […]

#27 Comment By Jim A On August 14, 2012 @ 9:29 am

I think mottos have to be even shorter and punchier to be effective. Something like "Securing knowledge to enable learning." Or maybe "…to enable wisdom," I'm somewhat ambivalent about which one sounds better.

#28 Comment By Kenley Neufeld On August 14, 2012 @ 11:19 pm

I think we spend too much time trying to explain ourselves rather than just being who we are. If we do our very best and demonstrate value (I do on my campus) then I hardly ever have to explain myself or the functions of a librarian.

#29 Comment By Emily Ford On August 16, 2012 @ 4:32 pm

Thanks, Lane, for chiming in. It's interesting to me that you are focused on the "how" yet we both seem to be on the same page, or at least we're in the same chapter.

I guess I would answer the "how" with praxis. If our "how" is informed by praxis, not a rote or mechanized act, then I think we're doing it right.

It's going to take me some time to digest the philosophy of librarianship vs. formal philosophy within librarianship– an interesting idea that I want to play with some more.

Thanks for helping me think more about these issues!

#30 Comment By Emily Ford On August 16, 2012 @ 4:33 pm

Thanks for chiming in, Steve. Do Madison and Carnegie cut it any more? I'm not convinced.

#31 Comment By Emily Ford On August 16, 2012 @ 4:35 pm

I'm a fan of "radical, militant librarian" myself. :)

But seriously, it's a huge failing that ALA has a motto on its web site that only discusses "reading." We do so. much. more.

#32 Comment By <u>James</u> On August 17, 2012 @ 6:34 pm

To be honest, our biggest problem is that we spend too much time talking to each other, and not enough time talking to those outside the profession. We also tend to talk and talk endlessly instead of eventually doing something, which is why we're still stuck with things like MARC records and Dewey.

#33 Pingback By <u>Keeping the end in mind (also: public libraries and cross-country travel) | Chasing Reference</u> On August 22, 2012 @ 4:58 pm

[...] approaches to this topic than my personal anecdotes – Emily Ford's indispensible take on developing a philosophy of librarianship and Lane Wilkinson's discussion of librarians as experts on the "chain of testimony" are the [...]

#34 Comment By <u>Rebecca</u> On September 10, 2012 @ 1:38 pm

Perhaps one of the best discussions I've read about the historical purpose/philosophy of librarianship is Todd Honma's treatment of it in his article "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies." I see so much of his article that feeds directly in this much-needed conversation about praxis, and I'd recommend reading it – particularly the "Library ontologies and the construction of whiteness" section. I believe that portion of the article speaks to the issue of "cultural diversity" that commenter Jonesy touches upon above.

It's available here: <u>http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nj0w1mp</u>.

#35 Pingback By <u>Living our values | Information Wants To Be Free</u> On September 13, 2012 @ 10:35 pm

[...] colleague, Emily Ford, wrote a brilliant piece about our identity, philosophy, and expression of value as a profession. Following up on [...]

#36 Comment By <u>Emily Ford</u> On September 18, 2012 @ 8:42 pm

Thanks, Rebecca, for the tip. This is going on my "to read" list.

#37 Comment By <u>Rachel</u> On September 24, 2012 @ 2:37 pm

Yes, I have taken some wording from above, but what about Motto: "Libraries/librarians facilitating the engagement and preservation of knowledge."

#38 Pingback By <u>Why We Do What We Do | Peer to Peer Review</u> On September 27, 2012 @ 9:43 am

[...] 2012 Leave a Comment Last month In the Library with the Lead Pipe published a long essay asking What Do We Do and Why Do We Do It? It calls for a philosophy of librarianship, noting that people have been calling for such a thing [...]

#39 Pingback By <u>Library Juice » Academic Libraries, Information Literacy, and the Value of Our Values</u>

On November 8, 2012 @ 7:24 pm

[...] a recent post from In the Library With a Lead Pipe, Emily Ford asks us to consider the "why" of what we do as an intervention in what she sees as failed [...]

#40 Pingback By New How To Discover Your Perfect Value Proposition – Stephen's Lighthouse On November 26, 2012 @ 6:57 am

[...] Ford, E. (2012, August 8). What we do and why we do it? In the Library With a Lead Pipe. Retrieved from http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2012/what-do-we-do-and-why-do-we-do-it/. [...]

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