Creative tensions: reflections on education for librarianship and information work in developing countries

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Several times a year, usually a few weeks before I attend a conference where I've undertaken to speak, I ask myself what I let myself in for. What do I really know about the topic that I so blithely agreed to speak about six or nine months ago? What can I tell an audience of experts who all know much more about the conference theme than I do? When I confided these misgivings to him, our ever-persuasive Program Chair, Ismail Abdullahi, suggested that I use my experiences as an educator, administrator and IFLA Secretary General (2005-2008) in working with issues of developing countries, and share with you my vision of LIS education in the developing world. That was at the same time encouraging and daunting.

This presentation is not based on empirical research. Neither is it based on an exhaustive study of the literature, although I made a point of reading all the chapters on LIS education in the recent IFLA publication, *Global library and information services: a textbook for students and educators* (IFLA Publications 136-137), edited by Ismail (Abdullahi, 2009). Essentially this presentation is based on non-systematic general reading and some personal experience and observations. Not counting my year as a teaching assistant in 1967 (which was a life-changing experience because it taught me that I could teach and enjoyed teaching – if you can't enjoy it, don't do it!), my teaching experience goes back to 1971 when I was appointed as a junior lecturer in a South African library school. Since then my career has alternated between practice and teaching. I have experience the full gamut of professional practice from entry level professional work through first-line supervision to senior management. I have extensive experience of employing the products of library schools. I like to think that practical experience has enriched my teaching, while teaching has enriched my professional practice.

In this paper I plan to reflect on:

- The soul and spirit theme of this pre-conference
- The Cadillac model of LIS education
- The camel model of LIS education
- Some creative tensions

- A personal vision of global LIS education

Soul, spirit and body

I was puzzled by the conference theme, "Building bridges: connecting the soul and spirit of LIS Education in Developing Countries". I asked Ismail for some exegesis, but in this he didn't help me much. Since it is incumbent on a keynote speaker to connect with the conference theme and at least to understand it, I trust that you will allow me briefly to fall back on my spiritual roots. In the Judeo-Christian tradition there has been much discussion of the concepts of soul, spirit, and body. Soul and spirit are not synonyms. In the letter to the Hebrews (in the New Testament) there are these striking words:

> ...the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

Christian theologians seem to concur (in as far as they ever do agree on anything) that spirit is what connects us to God, while the soul is our inner self, including our self-awareness, rationality and natural feelings. I want to apply this to our pre-conference topic as follows:

- Spirit is our connection to a global professional ethos and ideal, that of a mediating profession that connects people with knowledge and information so that they can live liberated and fruitful lives.
- Soul is what is unique to us in our cultural contexts (languages, beliefs, traditions, values), that which makes librarianship and information work different in different countries.

But don't forget the body. The English expression "to keep body and soul together" conveys the notion of survival in difficult times, particularly, getting enough to eat and feed one's family. This notion is not all that far removed from the daily experience of poorly-paid colleagues in some developing countries. Thus in the context of this meeting:

- Body implies resources for survival and action, of libraries as well as of librarians.

In this tripartite view of the human condition, or for that matter, in our profession, there are inherent tensions. For example tensions between:

- the desire to contribute to the development of rural communities (soul) and the lack of educational and logistical resources to train students for this task (body)
- professional standards of information service (spirit) and availability of connectivity (body)
- the desirability of a broad general education for librarians (spirit) and the educational philosophy of a given country (soul)

You may not agree with my categorization of spirit, soul and body (I may change my mind too) but I think the examples demonstrate that there are tensions. I hope to show that there can be creative tensions.

The Cadillac model of LIS education

There is hardly any contribution to the literature of education for librarianship and information work in developing countries in which there is no comparison, explicit or implied, with education in the West, especially with that in the USA. Since the beginning of this year I have been teaching in the United States, in the School of Information Studies (SOIS) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and I am able to make this comparison at first hand.

The LIS education system in the USA is impressive. The qualifications and expertise of the SOIS teaching staff and their research output are outstanding. We teach the full masters degree in library and information science (MLIS) program online as well as on campus. But what has impressed me most is the students. I teach graduate students enrolled for the MLIS, the majority of whom have work experience. Almost all of them are currently employed, in many different occupations, some full-time, others in part-time positions. Most have library experience in one capacity or other. Because they are making a sacrifice to improve their qualifications, the level of motivation is high. The quality of class discussions reflects the range of work experience and life experience that they are able to bring to the course. "International" (foreign) students add to the diversity and insights. Having taught undergraduate students in LIS programs in South Africa, many fresh out of school and without any prior exposure to books and libraries, I feel very privileged. I tell my American colleagues that they don't realize how fortunate they are.

This is the Cadillac model of LIS education. Its flagship qualification is a masters level degree course of 1½ to two years' duration, which follows a bachelor's degree that has provided a general, liberal education background. It requires a significant investment not only by the students, but also by the profession which accredits the programs. It is clearly a model for wealthy countries.

Yet this model is not without problems. Tensions and concerns are evident from, among other things, a current debate in the United States about the accreditation of the MLS programs, which is conducted by the Committee of Accreditation (COA) of the American Library Association (ALA). In 2006 the ALA set up a Task Force on Library Education, which drew up a set of eight competencies intended to define "the basic knowledge to be possessed by all persons graduating from an ALA-accredited master's program" (ALA 2008a:3). The set of competencies was approved by the ALA in early 2009. The Task Force also submitted a number of recommendations on accreditation to the ALA's Executive Committee. Here are two of them that generated controversy:

- The standards for accreditation should be prescriptive rather than indicative (suggesting a move from guidelines towards more prescriptive standards).
- The majority of permanent full-time faculty (academic staff) in library programs should have a background "grounded in librarianship" and they should be sufficient to carry out the major share of the program, without undue reliance on temporary and part-time faculty members (Rettig 2009).

In a presidential message somewhat provocatively entitled "Educating the teachers", 2008/9 ALA President Jim Rettig (2009) called on ALA members to comment on these recommendations. A blog was set up for this purpose (ALA 2009). Posts on this blog reflect tensions between practicing professionals and library managers on the one hand and LIS educators on the other. Concerns of the practitioners and managers relate mainly to a perceived erosion of the librarianship content of the MLS curriculum, which is criticized as being too interdisciplinary and too theoretical, with too much non-library information theory taught by teachers with little or no background in librarianship.

Underlying this seems to be a lingering unhappiness about the closure of library schools, the dwindling place of library programs in the schools as they expand into newer information-related fields, and the continuing trend to omit librarianship or "library science" from names of schools. The latter trend was illustrated recently by the decision taken by Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, to change the name of its School of Communication, Information and Library Science to "School of Communication and Information". In a press release (Rutgers 2009) the President of Rutgers, Richard L. McCormick, was quoted as commenting:

> This change will help the residents of New Jersey and the nation's academic community better understand the strengths at Rutgers' School of Communication and Information. The new name also communicates the school's mission and values at the very broadest level of scholarship and inquiry. This clarity is pivotal at a time when the fields of communication and information are central to societal changes occurring as we speak.

The "L-word" (library) was evidently an obstacle to the desired clarity, even though the School continues to host an academic department of library and information science.

These are not the only problems that concern the beneficiaries of the Cadillac model. In discussions with my students concern is expressed about the return on their investment in the MLIS degree, as salaries offered to librarians are not commensurate with the length of their education. A further concern relates to an apparent paradox of job opportunities: a large percentage of US librarians are in their 50s or older, and due to retire in 5-10 years. It is not clear who will replace them. At the same time, graduates are failing to find jobs. As a result of the economic recession, *American libraries direct*, the electronic newsletter of the ALA, every week carries reports on reductions in hours of service and closure of branches. In school libraries especially, jobs are being cut on a large scale; it is by no means sure that they will be restored if and when the recession ends.

Much of this may well be familiar to library educators in developing countries.

The camel model of LIS education

While planning this paper I chose the word "camel" to refer to LIS education in the developing world, partly for purposes of alliteration. No doubt I was also influenced by the well-publicized Kenyan camel libraries. In the vast, arid North-Eastern Province of Kenya, camels are used to deliver library services to remote rural communities. The camels are based

at the branch library of the Kenya National Library Service in the town of Garissa. They visit pastoralists, schools, adult literacy programs and refugee camps in a radius of about 20 km around Garissa (IFLA 2002; Tate 2002). They make it possible to render library services in areas that cannot be reached by motor vehicles.

The camel is a sturdy, reliable low-tech beast, capable of immense endurance in difficult circumstances. As such it seems an appropriate icon for librarianship in developing countries, and for LIS education in those countries. Thus when we think of library education in developing countries we tend to think of small, isolated library schools, with not enough highly educated teachers, poorly paid but dedicated. We think of library schools lacking information resources both print and digital, with limited connectivity, teaching students who have not been exposed to a broadly-based education and who may have had a very limited prior exposure to books and libraries. But these mental images may be misleading. The camel model has two limitations.

First, although the images of camels bringing books to isolated communities evoke warm, fuzzy feelings in librarians world-wide, the program is very tiny in relation to the huge unserved populations in Africa and other developing regions. It's a brave effort, deserving of our admiration, but it is only a small part of the answer. We should not allow such iconic images to color our thinking of librarianship and LIS education in the developing world.

Second, while the camel-borne services (and elsewhere donkey -borne services) epitomize heroic efforts they also unwittingly propagates a stereotype of poverty and under-development. It is a grave error to overlook the diversity of the developing world and the degree to which conditions in the developed and developing world overlap. A Swedish professor of global health, Hans Rosling, who has spent many years researching diseases related to malnutrition in Africa, has made it his mission to demolish some of the myths surrounding developing countries. He has used a novel interactive statistical program to illustrate very vividly the diversity that characterizes developing countries in his own field of public health. For example, he has compared changes in fertility, life expectancy and child mortality over time in a large number of countries, correlating them with economic indicators such as GDP and per capita income (Rosling 2006). From his analyses three things stand out:

- Developing countries are not a solid, homogeneous block to which uniform solutions can be applied.
- There is an increasing convergence and overlap of conditions in developing and developed countries.
- Within individual developing countries there may be a wide range of socio-economic conditions.

If this is true of librarianship and information work, as it is for global health and socio-economic development, the implication is that the camel model is not representative of the developing world. It is not representative of Africa. It is not even representative of Kenya. Like the Cadillac model the camel model can be misleading and even dangerous. Librarians and information workers in the developed and developing countries have more in common than we may think. This applies also to certain underlying tensions relating to LIS education, tensions that are present in both developed and developing countries. In developing countries

they may manifest themselves in more acute and existential forms, but that does not mean that they are absent in developed countries. In the following section I shall try to evoke these tensions as they appear in the literature and our professional meetings.

Tensions

I spoke earlier about tensions between body, soul and spirit. At this point I take leave of these theological notions to concentrate on tensions of a different, more down-to-earth order; limiting myself to three axes of tension which together constitute a three-dimensional space. These are the tensions between:

- Wealth and Poverty
- Western and Traditional contexts
- Librarianship and Information Science

Wealth and poverty

The literature of librarianship in developing countries is replete with references to lack of resources. As I mentioned, sub-Saharan Africa is the region with which I am most familiar. Sadly, it is probably the extreme case as it is widely thought to be the developing region that is at greatest risk of falling behind the rest of the world. Around the turn of the century there were two fairly comprehensive reports that documented the parlous state of university libraries (Rosenberg 1997) and public libraries (Issak 2000) respectively. Rosenberg drew a picture of university libraries with woefully inadequate monograph collection (mostly outdated student texts), libraries unable to support faculty research because they were almost devoid of current periodicals (or entirely reliant on donations for current subscriptions), of delapidated buildings and inadequate technical infrastructure, and of non-functioning resource sharing systems (Rosenberg 1997:14-33). Issak's country reports contain many references to the financial difficulties and deteriorating state of the public libraries in the English-speaking countries.

The current situation of libraries in wealthy countries is by no means rosy. Even Harvard University has been forced to make cuts in its library budget because the investment income on which that prestigious university relies has been badly affected by the current economic downturn . But there is undeniably a huge gap -- a glaring gap, an immoral and obscene gap -- between rich and poor.

Table 1 presents an impressionistic overview of the field of tension between wealth and poverty. Note these are not necessarily neat pairs of opposing concepts. Look at the columns rather as concept clouds.

Table 1: Wealth vs. poverty

Wealth	Poverty
Resources	Lack of resources
Up to date	Obsolescent
ICT Infrastructure	Lack of bandwidth
Choices	Constraints
Specialization	Essentials, core
Investment (by governments & institutions)	Reliance on donors
Graduate education	Barefoot librarians
Problems of plenty	Survival
Professionalism	Vocation
Center	Periphery
Attracting talent	Brain drain

The question arises: how do we train librarians for working in poor libraries? It's a multi-dimensional problem. How do we train librarians in library schools that have under-resourced and poorly functioning libraries? What perspectives can we impart? How can we bridge the gap between the norms and assumptions set out in the standard American and British texts on library management, and what the students observe for themselves as they use their university library as a resource and a laboratory? Must their learning about modern systems and services be purely theoretical because they cannot observe and utilize them in their own environment?

These are rhetorical questions. A rhetorical question is posed not to obtain information but as a persuasive device to underline the speaker's point. Often the point is overstated or oversimplified. This is also the case here. The situation is much more complex and therefore not as hopeless as it may seem if we focus only on the gap between rich and poor. I mention four factors which are at the same time complicating and mitigating:

First: If we read the Rosenberg and Issak reports it becomes clear very quickly that the problems described are not only the result of inadequate resources. There are also major problems of policies and practices, management, staff morale and motivation, advocacy and political savvy that need to be addressed. These are areas where a library school, even poorly-resourced, can make a difference.

Second: Growing connectivity and improved Internet access, together with the increasing availability of scholarly and educational content online (open access and open learning) have great potential for leveling the playing field. I say potential. Much remains to be done, but there is hope.

Third: The situation of library schools is not uniformly dire across all developing countries. As Hans Rosling has indicated for global health, a similar narrowing of the gap has occurred in many countries. Think of Singapore, South Korea, China, Brazil and South Africa. I obtained some of the material I used for this paper from the University of Pretoria because its electronic journal holdings include some titles (published in developed countries) to which the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's library cannot afford to subscribe. The reason: deep

discounting of these subscriptions for libraries in developing countries does not apply in Milwaukee.

Fourth: Wealth and poverty should not be looked at solely in material terms, or in terms of resources from the developed world. We should not overlook the natural wealth of developing countries in terms of community communication systems, traditional and cultural resources and indigenous knowledge. These factors are dealt with in the following section.

Western and traditional contexts

Seminal writings by the likes of Ronald Benge (1979), Adolphe Amadi (1981), Kingo Mchombu (1982), Gassol de Horowitz (1988), and Sturges and Neil (1990) have conscientized a generation of librarians, sensitizing us to the contradictions inherent in transplanting western models of librarianship to developing countries. That is not to say that we have resolved the tensions that are evoked by the concepts in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Western vs. Traditional/indigenous librarianship

Western	Traditional/indigenous
Formal	Informal
Rectilinear	Circular. intertwined, spiral
Atomistic	Holistic
Cause & effect	Complexity
Proving/knowledge	Understanding/wisdom
Universal	Rooted in environment
Dichotomies (body, mind; living/dead, organic/inorganic)	Oneness with nature; all things have souls
Concentration on dominant languages	Multiplicity (languages, cultures)
Literacy	Orality
Conveying knowledge	Apprenticeship

Is librarianship, with its emphasis on order, rationality and linearity essentially western? How do we educate librarians in developing countries without alienating them from their roots -- their communities and cultures? How do we connect communities to the global knowledge society without overwhelming them with western commercial mass culture? Is there such a thing as information or cultural resistance -- can we inoculate communities against the viral spread of superficiality?

Again: rhetorical questions. In fact, things are not quite so clear-cut. Today information scientists have discovered the long tail, the wisdom of the crowd, and folksonomies. Modern ICTs and the boundless capacity of the Internet have the potential to allow access to even the most esoteric and obscure groups, and to culture and language groups on the verge of extinction -- the long tail phenomenon. The hierarchical system of cognitive authority is widely challenged. Pastors, professors, doctors, journalists, all these authorities can no longer hold forth and expect to be listened to with with universal respect (Nicholson 2006). The Internet allows the "lay public" to obtain second, third and fourth opinions. This makes for a more uncomfortable world for librarians but also for a more colorful and diverse world in

which many paradigms can coexist. Tag clouds contradict and complement the traditional linearity of western library systems. Perhaps we are not so far apart after all.

Paul Sturges (2004) has suggested that oral tradition, traditional culture and beliefs are not "interesting side issues to the actual business of librarianship" but may be "a vital starting point for services that people will perceive as relevant to their lives" (Sturges 2004:104-105). It is interesting to see how community radio, the Internet and community multimedia centers are converging to support and nurture people-centered "endogenous *processes*" as distinct from simply providing *access* to ICTs and content from outside (Dralega 2009; McKay 2009). Reading accounts of what is being done using community radio, I had a distinct sense of envy: where are the libraries in these initiatives? Library schools in developing countries need to look not only at technologies and theories coming from the developing countries, but also at initiatives by other professions in their own countries.

Librarianship and Information Science

There is considerable tension between librarianship, the field of practice of what Sue Myburgh (2005) has called "traditional information practitioners" (TIPs), and information science, a polymorphous, poorly delineated field which shades into records management, information resource management, knowledge management, information architecture, competitive intelligence, etc. As the name "librarianship" suggests, the field is associated with an institution, the library. But information science is information liberated from that institution; it is concerned with information wherever it may be. For my master's thesis, written thirty years ago, I started off studying library use by doctors, and ended up studying the information needs of family physicians. My thesis hardly mentioned libraries. This has been a common phenomenon for librarians. We are nowhere near as housebound as we have been made out to be. Information science comes naturally to us. But at some point the connection with librarianship is lost, and we venture into border territories also claimed by other professions such as computer scientists, information technologists, managers and accountants.

Where do these boundaries lie? And should we in any case be concerned with them? Michael Gorman (2009:209) has placed emphasis on identifying the core of librarianship, which he sees as "...centred on the human record -- that vast assemblage of messages and documents (textual, visual and symbolic) created by humans since the invention of written and visual communication". On the other hand Sue Myburgh (2005:7) stated: "Too much discussion takes place on what is core when we should be looking at the boundaries."

Table 3 attempts to summarize the tensions between opposing groups of concepts.

TABLE 3: Librarianship vs. Information Science

Librarianship	Information Science
Institutional	Societal
Collection centered	Technology-driven
Content	Form
Art, craft	Academic discipline
	Hard science (-metrics)
Qualitative	Quantitative (Bibliometrics, etc.)
Analog	Digital
Old stuff, the book, "dusty", "musty shelves"	IT, new media, virtual reality
Preservation, heritage	Innovation, just in time
Vocation	Profession
Librarian**ship**	Information **Science**
School and public libraries	Special libraries, information centers, virtual libraries
Patrons, children, homeless, elderly	Clients, customers
General public	Elites, highly educated, special groups
Reference service	Knowledge management
Culture	Competitive intelligence
Recreation	Information as a strategic resource

In a comment posted on the standards review blog to which I referred earlier, Joseph McDonald (2009) commented: "It strikes me it is time to recognize the dissolution of “librarianship” as a single profession. Public librarians and academic librarians, at whatever level, have rather little in common, any longer. And 'special' librarians, information specialists, and information scientists have long had very little in common with academic or public librarians."

I am reminded of a poem by William B Yeats (1920):

> Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;
> ...
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.
> (William Butler Yeats, "The second coming")

The centrifugal forces operating here create special challenges for developing countries. Here library schools (in many cases, a single library school per country) must on the one hand educate professionals who can work at grass-roots level to promote literacy, sustainable rural development, and preserve and nurture local traditions and indigenous knowledge. On the other, they must develop a new generation of IT-savvy professionals who can develop sophisticated information services for an internationally competitive economy. And what to offer the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed youngsters who come back from America with an MLIS loaded with high-tech credits? Will they stay, or drift back to join the brain drain?

A personal vision of LIS education

Ismail challenged me to present a vision. A vision of LIS education requires a vision of LIS. I like to think that libraries and related information agencies provide public spaces (real or virtual) in which people can connect with the accumulating record of human thought, the ultimate purpose of such connections being to expand our horizons, deepen our understanding and to liberate us by multiplying our options. Librarians and information workers carry out a wide range of functions to make the connections possible. Michael Gorman (2009) has listed these functions and has centered the definition of librarianship on the human record; I would shift the focus slightly, towards the users. For me the essence of librarianship is *mediation* between the human record and its users. Librarians are intermediaries. So are the non-traditional information professionals such as information scientists and knowledge managers. LIS schools need to train professionals able and motivated to serve as intermediaries between people and the human record, in all contexts and in all regions of the world, to serve in institutions and agencies that are central to the development of equitable, democratic and humane knowledge societies.

Here are some elements of a vision for LIS schools in developing countries. I would like to see:

- LIS schools teaching both librarianship and information science in a creative, symbiotic relationship, in which cross-fertilization can take place, without constraining or neglecting either.
- The development of multidisciplinary schools to provide education for librarians, archivists, documentalists, museologists. publishers, etc. to achieve economies of scale and, again, allow cross-fertilization
- Within LIS schools, librarianship programs reflecting an international common core of librarianship, enhanced by regional, national and local components that reflect the context in which they are located, much as suggested by Gorman (2009)..
- LIS programs sensitizing students to the information needs of rural and traditional peoples, peri-urban transitional settlements and the urban poor, and imbuing students with respect for the human dignity of all groups in the society they serve.
- LIS schools staffed by well-educated, mature teachers, a significant proportion of whom will have been exposed to professional practice in libraries and related information agencies, and who are capable of conveying to students the challenge and excitement of serving their peoples as information intermediaries.
- LIS schools cooperating nationally, regionally and across the north-south divide.
- Multilingualism and multiculturalism in LIS education -- more acknowledgement that we live in a multipolar world.
- The use of the Internet and web-based learning to cover cooperatively our ever-expanding terrain, for example by the coordinated development and teaching of specialized courses and by helping teachers in smaller, more isolated library schools, to broaden and deepen their knowledge and expertise.

As already suggested, a vision should not be restricted to LIS schools in developing countries. A further and key part of my vision is that education in our field -- in developed as well as developing countries -- will become become more international and promote

international awareness and understanding, an ideal to which I am personally committed.

Conclusion

I have sketched three sets of tensions that emerge when one examines the literature on library and information services and the education of personnel to staff these services in developing countries. I see these not as dichotomies but as axes, which together define a three-dimensional space. All library and information services, and all schools of library and information studies, can be located somewhere in this space on the three axes. The axes of tension that define the space within which we work demand and make possible a fascinating diversity of responses. Thus we are all unique -- but we have more in common than we may think. I hope that this pre-conference will demonstrate that we have much to share and that we are not alone in our daily struggle to balance the demands of body, soul and spirit.

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