TRANSMISSION OF A PROFESSIONAL CULTURE: TRANSITION MENTORING

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study about the nature of mentoring during the transition from a departing experienced school librarian to the arrival of a new professional. The term coined for this study, transition mentoring, is defined as the transmission of culture and practice of the exiting librarian to the new professional who is taking his/her position. As cultural curators of their organizations, librarians are unique in their knowledge and practice and often information critical to the efficient functioning of their libraries is lost during the period of transition. The study surveyed school librarians relatively new to their positions about their experiences in the transition to their schools. The study concluded that communication of the professional culture of the library should be imparted through objects, forms and information left by the exiting librarian. Also important is the practical knowledge of support staff. Transition mentoring programs should be studied further in a variety of library and information settings.

INTRODUCTION

Experienced librarians who have been working in institutions for a number of years are repositories of unique knowledge engendered from their practice. This is not only knowledge of the resources and services they provide but, more importantly, of the organizational culture they navigate in order to provide service. To work effectively in a particular organizational culture, it is necessary to determine the hierarchy of the institution (the chain of command), the interpersonal relationships (key players, the formal and informal leaders), how to compete for resources (budgetary and administrative), and to understand the symbols and systems of rewards of that institution.[1] A librarian who has spent a career navigating, and perhaps developing these cultural norms, is not only the repository of the resources, but is also the cultural curator of the institution. Often this unique knowledge is lost when the librarian leaves or retires. The new professional replacing her then must re-discover this critical information. This creates a disconnect not only in the efficient work of the institution but especially for the person succeeding the seasoned professional.

From their graduate programs, new librarians enter the profession with some knowledge of the myriad tasks they need to perform, as well as a vision of how to incorporate skills and knowledge into the library's culture, but with only a vague sense of what that might entail. The experience of the incoming librarian of the library's culture is central to their acclimation and ultimate performance. The most important person able to provide information on policy, collection, curriculum, and other vital functions is the exiting librarian.

This article analyzes the nature of "transition mentoring," that is, the transmission of knowledge from the exiting professional to the new one. An exploratory study was completed in 2005 that analyzed the pathways for the transmission of a professional culture to occur. I begin with a review of how mentoring occurs in various library fields. I then present the salient points of the study and note challenges that arise during the transition period in the words of new librarians. I conclude with suggestions to ease the transition experienced by new professionals in they enter into a library facility and culture.

MENTORING IN LIBRARIES

Mentoring is an important and popular practice in libraries and schools today. There have been many articles written about mentoring in the professional literature, whether it is library related, or comes from business or the field of education. A most pertinent reason for the attention given to mentoring in librarianship resides in the demographics projecting retirements in the library and academic fields. For example, it was predicted that between 2000 and 2010, 40% of the professional members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) were to retire, with an additional 27% between 2010 and 2020.[2] (p41)

Mentoring has been defined as "a professionally supportive relationship between an experienced, successful mid-career employee and a beginner. It is a time-honored method of encouraging new talent, of sharing expertise and connections, and of providing rapid, upward mobility to selected professionals."[3] Mentoring is a concept that has a long and venerable history. The term is most often said to come to us from Greek mythology. When Odysseus left his family for twenty years to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted his possessions and his son Telemachus to his close friend Mentor, who was responsible for his protection, guidance, and education. The word "mentor" now means a wise and trusted counselor. In all these centuries, the core idea of mentoring has remained faithful to the original concept. The need for mentoring exists in all library organizations, but the practice varies among different kinds of libraries. The following section examines the current conversation about mentoring in different library organizations.

Academic Libraries

Gail Munde examines research on the attributes of mentoring and current mentoring practices in academic libraries and states that "Library organizations must reinvent the ancient and venerable practice of mentoring."[4] She presents an alternative proposal for organizational mentoring in academic libraries by advocating "consciously preparing employees to fill vacancies that are anticipated profession–wide…whether or not those persons chose to stay in their 'sponsoring libraries,'"[4 (p173)] rather than the current practice of mentoring for staff orientation or tenure/promotion only. Munde frames mentoring as a vehicle for succession planning.

   A more recent article by Sarah Anne Murphy continues the argument for "reconceptualizing mentoring."[5] Because of the "rapid transformation of library collections and services in the information age," Murphy posits a pivotal question, "Is it also practical or realistic for seasoned library professionals to continue to prepare lesser experienced librarians for the future using traditional hierarchical mentoring relationships?"[5 (p434)] Murphy's article examines current perceptions of mentoring in recent management and human resources literature. A key element in this literature is acknowledging the role of mentoring relationships in the transmission and maintenance of an organization's tacit knowledge, which is "tidbits of information or knowledge which are not explicitly stated but understood through stories."[5 (p436)] These "tidbits" can consist of technical knowledge that enable new professionals to work more efficiently, as well as "information about the organization's political situation and cultural norm,"[5 (p436)] which can help in effectively navigating institutional practices.

Medical Libraries

Mentorship for medical librarians has also been a part of the mentoring discussion in librarianship. After reviewing the literature on academic mentoring, Hongjie Wang concludes that "mentoring among medical reference librarians has not been widely practiced and definitely not adequately reported."[6] Wang's article discusses the author's personal experience of mentoring as an effective means to ease a new medical reference librarian's transition from pre-service experience to the professional workplace and notes the following as "highly valued" in the mentoring relationship: "advice on goal setting, opportunities for participation in professional activities, insight into the management of the institution, and, most importantly, effective means and ways to sharpen and learn technical skills from someone who knows."[6 (p29)] These attributes are critical for new professionals to learn from the onset of their practice from one who is experienced in the ways and means of the particular institution.

Archives

In 2006, the Society of American Archivists presented the results of its first broad survey of individual archivists in thirty years, A*CENSUS (Archival Census and Education Needs Survey in the United States), which developed a comprehensive profile of the profession at a time when it was "facing a number of challenges as members of the Baby Boom generation…prepare to retire."[7 (p294)] Referring to Stanley Wilder's perception about one of these challenges,[8] the report states that it is critical not only to recruit new practitioners to replace those retiring, but also to assure "that the considerable body of knowledge and insight acquired by current archival workers – along with the core values of the archival profession – are conveyed effectively to the next generation." [7 (p318)]

Victoria Irons Walch, the project's principal research consultant, acknowledges the need to convey two critical types of knowledge, citing definitions of explicit and tacit knowledge:

> **Explicit knowledge**, which is "information that can be easily explained and stored in databases or manuals," and
>
> **Tacit knowledge**, which is "much harder to capture and pass on because it includes experience, stories, impressions and creative solutions."[9]

One of the action items Walch proposes is that "repositories should consider now how to establish systematic methods for transferring knowledge from older to younger workers."[7 (p 320)]

School Libraries

In the school library field, the dissemination of new standards such as the American Association of School Librarians' *Standards for the 21st Century Learner,*[10] the New York State *Standards for the Digital Learner,*[11] and new teacher certification standards in various states in the United States has heightened the need for mentoring. The "No Child Left Behind Act" (a United States federal law that requires "highly qualified and effective"[12] teachers for all public schools) and various state laws ensure that as teachers, school librarians must demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter that they teach.[13] In addition, many states, such as New York State, have mandated that all teachers who have received initial certification upon graduation from their universities must complete a mentored experience in the first year of teaching. While public schools have developed mentor programs for their classroom teachers, this presents a dilemma for the school library teacher, who performs other roles besides that of a teacher. A school librarian is also a program administrator, performing administrative and managerial services, and an information specialist, providing reference services. When a district assigns another teacher within the school to mentor the school librarian, the mentor has little understanding of all the roles of a school librarian and can thus offer only limited advice. If the district assigns a school librarian from another school as a mentor,

there is still a lack of understanding about the function of that school library within the culture of the particular school.

The only person who can provide information about the school's culture, students, curricula and teaching imperatives as it relates to the school library is the outgoing school librarian. Because of hiring practices, the incoming school librarian often does not have the opportunity of contact with the outgoing one. In addition, whereas all new classroom teachers need to adapt quickly to their sites and teaching assignments because students are relying on them as soon as the school year begins, incoming school media specialists, hired as teachers, share this requirement but to a greater extent. Not only students depend on their readiness, but classroom teachers also need their services as instructional partners and information specialists. It is expected that the school library is an efficiently functioning entity from the moment school begins. School librarians enter their schools with the belief that they are instructional leaders and partners to teachers and administrators, based on the philosophy of *Information Power*,[14] an American Library Association document that describes the roles and responsibilities that the school librarian should perform in the contemporary school environment.

Librarians enter their workplaces with the knowledge and skills engendered from their academic programs and internship or student teaching experiences. They are deemed qualified because they have passed paper and pencil tests and completed the required amount of coursework. At best, in their preparatory experiences, whether through observations or field experiences, pre-service librarians visit just a handful of libraries for a limited amount of time. They experience the culture of these sites in a fragmented way. Internships provide practical learning experiences from the perspective of the respective sites and the cooperating teacher and academic supervisor.

Learning how to read the culture of library organizations may or may not have been a part of their academic program. This includes information about the hierarchy of the institution, formal and informal leaders, budgetary imperatives, as well as the cultural norms, system of rewards, and unstated but important values that define the library. A great deal of working knowledge and insight leaves with the departing librarian as a new professional arrives and attempts to implement a new vision with little practical experience.

Summary

Implications from the above review of mentoring in several librarianship specialties include:

- There is a need for conscious preparation for succession, for the transition and maintenance of a library's technical and cultural information that resides with experienced librarians
- Traditional hierarchical mentoring is no longer effective for the fluid nature of librarianship as it is practiced today

- There is a need to identify methods for transferring knowledge and values from experienced librarians to new professionals
- Information that needs to be transferred is not only that which is easily explained but also the values and cultural norms that affect successful working situations and relationships.

The study described below attempted to define the nature of this kind of mentoring and to develop a systematic method of transmitting information so that it would useful to the incoming professional librarian. The study is limited because it had a small sample size and locality as well as limited to the school libraries. However, the resulting implications apply to all library fields.

A STUDY OF TRANSITION MENTORING IN SCHOOL LIBRARIES

An exploratory study by Beatrice Baaden and Jean Uhl, "Transition Mentoring: Transmission of a Professional Culture," examined the communication of past practices between exiting school library media specialists and incoming professionals; they coined the term, transition mentoring.[15] Transition mentoring is defined as the transmission of culture and practices of the exiting librarian to a new professional who is taking his/her position. It is the transmission of a professional culture. Transition mentoring is both similar to, yet different from, the traditional forms of mentoring noted in the studies discussed above. In academic libraries, mentoring usually involves a long term and supportive relationship between professionals to develop candidates for tenure and promotion. This is not the purpose of transition mentoring. Transition mentoring is a thoughtful way to anticipate the needs of the incoming professional when planning for succession. Transition mentoring does not call for a sustained relationship between professionals; it does recognize the need for the retiring professional to be cognizant that s/he will be followed by a librarian new to the cultural values and processes of that site and to take steps to communicate these.

   Many transitional challenges arise when a librarian begins a new position. In Baaden and Uhl's study, transitional problems of new librarians fell into the following themes: a feeling of being overwhelmed and not understood, difficult aides or important others, and little information left by the outgoing school librarian that was considered essential. It seemed the only person who was uniquely qualified to provide information about the school's culture, students, curricula, and teaching imperatives as they impacted the school library was the outgoing school librarian. Yet, because of school hiring practices, the incoming librarian often did not have opportunity for contact with the outgoing one. Thus, critical knowledge and information that can ease the transition of the new professional and facilitate changes in practice or continuation of practices in the school library is lost.

The general objective of the 2005 exploratory study by Baaden and Uhl was to examine the communication of past practices between an exiting school librarian and the incoming professional. The study analyzed communication patterns between departing and entering school librarians, materials that were left by the exiting professional, and people considered helpful by the incoming librarian in the transition to her new school.

Methodology

Ninety school library media specialists working in their positions from one to five years in schools in Long Island, New York, were surveyed. Long Island consists of two counties that are multi-ethnic and economically diverse. Qualified respondents served in a variety of grade levels: 53 taught in grades K – 5; 22 taught in grades 6 – 8; 9 taught in grades 9 – 12; and 6 taught in K – 12 schools. Of the 90 respondents, 61 had some form of communication with the exiting library media specialist. Baaden and Uhl developed an initial questionnaire based on their personal experience of transition mentoring and on concepts about effective mentoring in education. Pilot questionnaires were sent to four school librarians in new positions to test the design, terminology, and ease of use of the questionnaire. Based on comments, revisions were made. The final survey consisted of 11 questions in total: 8 directed questions and three open-ended opportunities for comments. Data were analyzed using content analysis. Ideas and concepts were identified from the closed questions, as well as open-ended responses, developed and analyzed. Main categories that emerged were the following: communication, materials, helpful people, and the nature of the transition. Comments were further categorized for transitional problems and suggestions.

Findings

Most respondents said that the communication they had with the exiting librarian took the form of a phone call, while others cited brief meetings and specific conversations about the administration of the library media center or about instruction. When there was a lack of communication, the incoming library media specialist felt at a loss or that she or he was floundering. New library media specialists reported that they felt overwhelmed and not understood by other teaching professionals in the building. One respondent stated that the transition was "difficult since no information was left about lessons and no information about curriculum. I had no idea about which information skills had been taught" and thus didn't have a good foundation on which to proceed. One library media specialist stated, "My first year I felt like I was drowning. Nearly every free moment during my week was spent researching ideas and planning lessons. The library itself was a mess. It's difficult when you're the only librarian in a school district." Such comments suggested that it is critical for exiting library professionals to make an effort to

meet formally with incoming colleagues to share information about instruction and managerial, administrative matters.

There were a number of materials left by exiting professionals that respondents noted were helpful in the transition. Exiting school library media specialists generally left more procedural information, such as prior purchase orders, budget, and circulation procedures, rather than instructional information. Yet when procedural information was not left, the new school library media specialist felt at a loss. One respondent noted, "It would have been wonderful if the exiting librarian could have given me some information on procedures already in place. I was very overwhelmed in the beginning." But sometimes the information left was out of date with current best practices. When relevant information was left, one new school library media specialist felt empowered and stated, "The retired librarian left good files with records of all transactions as well as notes about different programs she chaired. These, along with several lessons, helped me to evaluate the success of the library program and I could make changes to continue the success of the library media program."

A range of people were considered critical in the transition to the new library media center. Library support staff/paraprofessionals and their practical knowledge were deemed most important. Some respondents noted that they were "fortunate" to have a "terrific library clerk who was both willing to share the 'old ways,' but equally supportive when it came to trying out 'new ways.'" However, in some cases, library support staff was considered the biggest transition problem. One new school librarian reported that the "biggest obstacle to a successful transition was the assistant in the library. She was extremely difficult to work with and resistant to change of any kind." Respondents did report that other district library media specialists were helpful, often taking the form of mentors. They were particularly helpful in advising about specific library matters such as knowing proper procedures and understanding policies. For a complete mentoring experience, the new school library media specialist needed both a mentor in the school building and a librarian colleague, even from another building in the school district.

Discussion and implications for the library field

This study clearly shows that there needs to be greater consideration for some type of transition mentoring. This kind of transitional communication between the outgoing and incoming librarian is essential, yet not often done in a way that is helpful to the new professional. More formal meetings need to be deliberately planned. The exiting professional should hold one or more face–to–face meetings with the new professional and should introduce the new professional to important staff, show the location of important documents, and delineate important procedures. Discussion should take place about materials and the position of the library in the culture of the institution.

Communication of a professional culture should also be imparted through objects, forms, and information left by the exiting librarian. S/he should leave carefully labeled and accessible procedural information, such as circulation, budget, and beginning-of-year procedures, prior purchase orders, selection and acceptable use policies, automation procedures, words and protocols for technology, technology support information, lists/ ranges of barcodes, important phone numbers, and keys for the new person. For school media specialists or academic librarians with teaching responsibilities, instructional information should also be left, such as schedules and calendars, lesson plans, collaborative planning forms, bibliographies and information about instructional improvements under consideration. All should be left where the incoming librarian can have easy access.

In addition to materials and resources is the knowledge that the library support staff imparts to the new professional. Library support staff know about procedures and routines and should be prepared for their important role in transition mentoring.

CONCLUSION

Mentoring is a critical issue for the library field. Professional organizations, such as the Medical Library Association[16] and the Society of American Archivists[17] provide easy access to mentoring opportunities on their websites. Mentoring opportunities in those organizations are designed to facilitate communication between members with expertise in particular areas of their fields and members who want to build their knowledge. Participation in professional organizations is highly important for new professionals as they search for mentors.

The benefits of mentoring are numerous and diverse for library institutions. These benefits apply to more than just those involved in the mentoring relationship. In his book, *The Mentoring Manager*, Gareth Lewis divides the beneficiaries into three categories: the protégé, mentor and the organization.[18] Gail Munde confirms and adds to Lewis' list of benefits: protégés or mentees gain "higher salaries, overall career satisfaction, and satisfaction with their organizations;" mentors gain "a renewal of professional purpose…and a sense of satisfaction that one has helped to influence the future of the profession;" the organization gains "increased employee retention, reduced turnover, faster and more efficient introduction of junior employees to organizational norms and expectations…"[4] (p 172)

Each library or information setting has its own culture, as well as procedural imperatives and as such will need its own unique style of mentoring. Despite this, adopting transition mentoring would enable all kinds of libraries, whether they are large hierarchical institutions, small or medium sized information centers, or school libraries, to plan for succession within the specific organizational culture. New library professionals enter their workplaces with a vision of incorporating their skills and knowledge into the organizational culture, but have only a vague

idea of how to make it happen. The exiting library professional has critical knowledge that will facilitate this transition. Communication between the outgoing professional and the new one is critical for the transition process. Engaging in transition mentoring, where specific meetings occur and specific documents are left, is one way to ensure that a carefully nurtured professional culture is being successfully transferred. Transition mentoring programs should be studied further in a range of library and information settings.

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