TOWARDS A NEW LIBRARY PROFESSIONAL – REFLECTIONS ON THE QUALITY LEADERS PROJECT – YOUTH

David Percival
Librarian – Young adults and looked after children
Portsea Library, Portsmouth City Council, U.K.,
david.percival@portsmouthcc.gov.uk

ABSTRACT

It has been argued that public libraries in the UK are in terminal decline. In terms of personnel the current workforce is aging and is unsurprisingly failing to attract new professionals in a climate of continuing de-professionalisation. One commentator pointed out several years ago that public libraries are "sleepwalking to disaster".

This paper details how the Quality Leaders Project – Youth (QLP-Y) has delivered a working model that equips new library professionals with the skills and expertise to improve library services – in this particular case study, to socially excluded young people – bringing about management development through service development. After consultation with a large number of young people in their library authorities, Quality Leaders developed "audience development activities" which engaged young people with libraries in new, exciting and relevant ways, encouraging informal learning.

QLP-Y acknowledges the lack of innovation in the information sector and notes that public libraries are failing to engage their communities. It acknowledges that new library professionals need political skills to improve advocacy. Often innovation is blocked, symptomatic of a culture of resistance to change. The structure of QLP-Y discourages this by co-opting key strategic personnel in the local authority as "mentors" and "sponsors" to facilitate change.

CONTEXT

Over the past decade or so, public libraries in the United Kingdom have had a relatively high profile in the media. Often the debate – whilst continuing to celebrate public libraries as a force for good in our society – focuses on negatives. This criticism has not been without foundation. Commentators have pointed out that poor management and a lack of innovation are characteristics of public libraries.

Charles Leadbetter, for example, has argued that

Good public services need top quality senior management. Yet management development for libraries has been neglected. Most new graduates from library

schools do not go into public libraries and a core of senior librarians, recruited into public libraries 20 or 30 years ago, is on the verge of retiring. Public libraries face a shortage of management talent.[1]

It is certainly true that many public library authorities, perhaps mindful of this lack of "management talent" have been recruiting senior staff from backgrounds other than libraries, like the retail sector or marketing. This at least acknowledges, rightly or wrongly, two areas that public libraries have not been strong in – income generation and publicising the work they do. With increasing financial constraints on local authorities, there is growing tendency to employ staff without a library or information science qualification, as they are less expensive than workers with formal librarianship training. Naturally, this fact will serve as a disincentive for people to undertake such a course of professional study. Leadbetter takes this pessimistic view further, going on to say that in his opinion, public libraries are "sleepwalking to disaster."[1]

Another report, *Building Better Libraries* states from the outset that

for many potential users the outmoded design and poor location of some library buildings is a deterrent in itself. We need innovative solutions to make them relevant again.[2]

Others have pointed to the poor quality of materials held by libraries, and argue that this is why their usage is declining. Again the question is one of relevance of libraries, where people can purchase books more cheaply than ever before, and that libraries have been relatively slow in embracing the download culture. Attempts by libraries to engage people without books, for example ICT training, or other informal learning sessions, have sometimes been viewed with suspicion. Pressure groups such as *Libri* reported a

significant trend for senior librarians and library policy makers…to no longer see providing books as a prime responsibility…We see this as an excuse for the failure of public libraries to deliver what the public wants. Further, we believe that the public library will fulfil all its social roles if it does books properly: a good modern stock for reading and reference, available at times convenient to the public, and in premises which are welcoming, clean and decent.[3]

This is an argument that has had plenty of currency recently: that reading, and bookshops have experienced a resurgence in interest and libraries have failed to capture this new voracious audience for literature. Critics have pointed out that bookshops often have coffee shops on the premises and this café culture is conducive to the reading experience. Contrast this attitude with public libraries, where consumption of food or drink has traditionally been frowned upon, and where loitering, particular amongst socially excluded groups like the long term unemployed or homeless people has been actively discouraged.

There is, I think, a more abstract reason behind the decline in fortunes of public libraries. The very order and formality of some of these institutions is at odds with the disorder and informality of our lives in the early part of the twenty-first century. Whilst this rather old-fashioned image is reassuring to some: old spinster shushing librarians and row upon row of immaculately presented stock, it can be overwhelmingly off-putting to others. For many years librarians have appeared – in popular culture at least – as the gatekeepers of, rather than facilitators to, information. The librarian as guardian of information is simply unacceptable to the so-called "Google generation", where it does not matter if the user cannot spell a search term accurately – the technology offers suggestions.

Our profession needs to move beyond mere reductionist critiques of this state of affairs, "no-brainer Google search, bad, controlled vocabulary, good", for example. It strikes me that the very essence of librarianship is that it provides a very human face to an increasingly labyrinthine, and impersonal information society.

Concerns have been raised over the fall in visits and that the number of items being issued is in freefall – so much so that the decline could be terminal should it continue to fall at such a rate over the next few years. Finally, the very definition of public libraries is under contestation, with traditional library spaces re-branded in some areas as *Discovery Centres* or *Ideas Stores*. The argument here is that "library" is such an ideologically loaded term that it has ceased to be useful or helpful, in bringing in new customers.

Naturally, the U.K.'s professional association, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), has responded to these criticisms as best it can through the channels available to it. However, CILIP does at least have a duty to make sure that the library and information science (LIS) courses it accredits contain content relevant to the needs of new professionals. Just as important, is the need to ensure that the skills of new professionals are attractive to prospective employers in the sector.

Whilst this may seem a rather downbeat view of the current situation, I would argue that it provides many exciting opportunities for the development of new library services, and correspondingly, many opportunities for the development of new library professionals, via new LIS courses in order to achieve this.

QUALITY LEADERS PROJECT – YOUTH

In a profession that clearly needs new ideas, initiatives are required that have the vision necessary to ensure that public libraries remain a relevant and necessary force for social change. The Quality Leaders Project – Youth (QLP-Y) is one such vision, which aims to bring about "management development through service development." The "service development" in this project is the creation of a definite public library offer to young people, targeting in particular those who are socially excluded. Library provision to these groups of young people is at best patchy, at

worst, nonexistent. The message being sent out to young people is clear: if you are a teenager, and literate, you are welcome in the library. If you cannot read – and even more heinously, do not behave according to the moral code of whichever member of staff is present – you are, by default, most unwelcome. QLP-Y exists partly to make ALL young people welcome by meeting the needs of a previously neglected user group. Management development takes place because

> the meeting of unrecognised or under-recognised needs requires new or enhanced services, and new and enhanced services require new skills and know-how (including new management know-how). Acquisition of these new skills will create a level playing field for staff who have not been able to reach management positions, thereby enhance their ability to reach senior management positions.[4]

QLP-Y was managed from the Department of Applied Social Sciences based at London Metropolitan University. It was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, which provides grants that encourage engagement with some of the most vulnerable people in the country. QLP-Y recognised that whilst library professionals generally have the technical skills necessary to perform their duties, they often lack more specific skills, such as youth work, or more general customer service skills, that would enable them to promote a library offer to young people. Equally, whilst we should expect youth workers to be good at engaging young people, they are not always equipped with the skills to best promote the value, and transformative potential, of libraries and information.

QLP-Y recognised that the best way to achieve this skills exchange would be by bringing together workers from public libraries and youth services. Three local authorities took part in the project: the Boroughs of Barnet and Haringey in North London, Lincolnshire in the East Midlands and my local authority, Portsmouth City Council, on the south coast of England. Each authority's project was headed by Quality Leader (QL), who led a team made up of library and youth workers, and partners from other agencies. These agencies were diverse: from social services, to education workers, from community wardens to the voluntary sector.

The initial partnership between libraries and youth services would enable both groups to deliver relevant and exciting services to young people, primarily by putting young people in control, an increasing demand of national agendas around youth work. For example the government paper *Every Child Matters*, states that

> every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.[5]

To achieve this, in Portsmouth, 300 young people were consulted around the city. The majority were not users of libraries and would not be tempted to use libraries in their traditional form. We were also careful to ensure a majority of respondents were from "hard to reach groups." These groups included young people excluded

from mainstream education, asylum seekers and refugees, and children in residential or foster care. We asked them what sort of activities they would like to undertake in libraries and then developed these ideas into "audience development activities." This term marks a departure from the notion of "reader development" and was preferred because for many young people with low-level literacy skills, "reading" (and often even the word, "library") would be barrier – real or imagined – to usage. However, the central philosophy of the project is that once young people were actively welcomed to libraries, undertaking workshops of their own design, they would continue to use them, having felt a sense of ownership of their library.

QLP-Y provided a budget to each participating authority of £10,000, split roughly in half between providing workshops and providing any special equipment needed to carry out the audience development workshops. However, it was not so much the money, but the process of developing the activities, that was important.

Despite the protests from traditionalists referred to above, dismayed by the move "away from the book," public libraries have always promoted informal learning, and the audience development activities undertaken in Portsmouth libraries from 2006-2009 as part of QLP-Y continued were no exception.

Web design workshops

A group of young people were given training in website design, including a brief intro to Web 2.0. After this workshop, a group created a wiki for the Portsmouth Teen Reading Group, allowing young people to post reviews and discuss library issues electronically. The advantage of this technology is that it brings the library offer to many diverse locations and provides relative anonymity for the contributors, allowing young people to express themselves in ways they might not feel comfortable with in a traditional library setting. The wiki was successfully moderated by the young people, proving a point that once young people are given real responsibilities, they will act responsibly.

Poster designs

In the Central Library, a group of young people regularly congregated, creating some issues for the library staff. It was clear they valued the space that library provided and they wanted to design a poster so that they could actively promote the library amongst their friends. We recruited a local design company and the group came up with a number of suggestions. In the end posters were produced to be displayed in alternative, youth-friendly settings. Additionally, flyers were produced that could be passed on to young people across the city. This peer-to-peer promotion has been far more powerful than any traditional publicity that we as a service could come up with.

Art project

In partnership with social services, all Portsmouth's children in residential care produced original works of art that were displayed in the Central Library. The exhibition was opened by some prominent local figures and attended by the artists. Letters of congratulation were written to each young person by the city's elected official for Culture. After the exhibition, the paintings were framed and handed back to the young people. The exhibition was covered by the local news media, who were extremely positive. One local writer pointed out that the quality of the work, and the creativity involved, was a welcome antidote to all the prevailing negative stereotyping of young people.

Martial arts

A group of young people, excluded from mainstream education, attended informal learning sessions in a local youth club. They sometimes appeared in the nearby library during their break times, and would enjoy watching martial arts video clips on *You Tube*. The group was particularly interested in Bruce Lee's martial art of *Jeet Kune Do*, so with the support of QLP-Y we were able to organise a series of training sessions with a qualified instructor in the library. The sessions were also open to local young people not currently engaged in employment, education or training. These young people were then able to follow up their interest in martial arts with books and other printed information. The project was so successful that the youth club subsequently received additional local funding to provide further sessions.

Magazine production

A group of manga enthusiasts attended a workshop led by a professional artist. Over 40 young people attended at the Central Library and it was clear that there was a lot of creative talent in the group. They decided they would like to produce a magazine of their own, containing original manga and articles, entitled *Yatta!* We provided the young people with their own office space within the library, which they painted and furnished with items of their choice. We were also able to provide them with training by a graphic designer in *Adobe InDesign*, an industry standard desktop publishing package. The group meets every Saturday and they have been in control of the project from the outset, organising their own editorial board and rules.

Intergenerational project

A group of school pupils assisted an older group of blind and vision-impaired people to download books, newspapers, magazines and health information on specially adapted MP3 players. The sessions also included lunch, so there was a real social aspect to the sessions and the group were able to get to know each other

really well. The young people initially received disability awareness training and gained an understanding of the information needs of the older group. The blind and vision-impaired group gained an understanding of the issues facing young people. The technology purchased has been put to good use, with the project running several times since the original sessions.

INNOVATION AND NEW PROFESSIONALS

QLP-Y acknowledges the lack of innovation in the information sector and notes especially that public libraries are failing to engage many communities in a relevant and meaningful way. This lack of innovation cannot be solely blamed on financial resource constraints. For far too long, I would argue that public libraries in the U.K. have nurtured a seemingly homogenous user group, overwhelmingly white, middle class and female. This group of core library users can feel threatened if other groups are welcomed into the library so there is always a delicate balancing act between the need for the library service to be "open to all," as enshrined in the 1964 Public Library Act, and for the need to avoid negative criticism from active users who may write to their local politicians if they feel their library is being overrun with "undesirables." This homogenous and often very articulate core group, like the library workforce, is aging, so there is some substance in the pessimistic views on the sustainability of a public library service (and maybe, a publicly funded library service in the U.K.).

Innovation can be actively opposed by some groups of library workers, symptomatic of a general culture of resistance to change in the sector. If this resistance is led by senior managers, it can become destructive, making it very difficult to win hearts and minds of frontline workers. QLP-Y acknowledges this, using a structure of "mentors" and "sponsors" to assist the Quality Leader in service development.

My mentor was my line manager, acutely aware of the need for an improved youth offer and equally aware of the resistance from some library staff to working with young people. The inclusion of mentors and sponsors was a necessary part of the project which provided a framework to facilitate change by putting the QL in contact with key decision makers in the service to make things happen if there was any resistance from colleagues.

My sponsor was the council's Head of Culture, who was able to put me in contact with potential partners, as well as facilitating a series of training workshops for all library staff in youth work. This training was rolled out over a number of weeks and was valuable in getting frontline workers "on-side." The training was naturally delivered by the youth service and it is fair to say that they learned as much about libraries as the library staff learned about young people.

Additionally, my political skills were developed by the sponsor when he suggested I organise a seminar on the issues around libraries and young people. This

was attended by elected officials and other council agencies, as well as library and youth worker staff. Members of the QLP-Y steering group, university academics, also made presentations to the group and the seminar, although necessarily challenging, was universally well received.

QLP-Y proposes a model of activist librarianship that inevitably will make some library workers feel uncomfortable. Promoting the need to engage with young people to colleagues can be challenging in a society that is all too quick to demonise youths by equating them with criminality and social irresponsibility. The new professional/library activist needs to understand the circumstances that lead young people to be marginalised in the first place. We also need to deal with the simple fact that whilst public libraries have been successful at engaging children from birth to primary school age, they have been less successful in retaining this engagement as young people move through secondary education. Library workers must therefore shoulder some of the responsibility when teenagers (and any other socially excluded group) are further marginalised.

To address the lack of innovation in public libraries, QL's took part in a Master's-level module at London Metropolitan University in Innovation and development in information services. This course recognised that innovation and change, is a continual and necessary part of any successful library service, and that continuing professional development should ideally take place on a theoretical level as well as in the workplace.

The thirteen week course comprised various lectures and seminars around the politics of information, globalisation, equalities and change management. I felt that the course covered crucial areas of librarianship that were neglected in my original LIS studies. Certainly, the very subject matter of the politics of information, or the act of being an unashamedly "political" librarian, is at odds with the traditional notion that libraries are neutral or apolitical spaces. These myths of neutrality have been interrogated elsewhere, but essentially, everything offered in a library, from the book collection to the services provided and the communities served, is obviously influenced by political decisions.[6] These decisions will emerge at the highest level in the values of the local authority but will trickle right down to the values of frontline library workers.

I make no apologies for being an advocate of a politicised "critical librarianship", and there is a need for a greater understanding among new library professionals of the human rights model of librarianship, particularly in an increasingly globalised world. Toni Samek has written such a guide to this socially responsible paradigm that

> aims to encourage library and information workers and other stakeholders in information and knowledge societies to participate locally, nationally, and internationally in dialogue, collaboration, organisation, empathy, decision-making, practice, philosophy and policy development to promote the amelioration of social problems.[7]

This model of transformative librarianship is one that many professionals are uncomfortable with. How many of us have heard colleagues in public libraries complain that they "are not social workers," or actively tried to eject someone from a library who may not correspond to their notion of acceptable behaviour? So called "professional issues" are covered in very general terms In LIS courses, like censorship, freedom of information, intellectual freedom and library ethics. However, once in the workplace, there is a danger that new professionals become very quickly institutionalised, adhering rapidly to the routine and structures of the organisation.

The New Professionals Discussion Group has two particular concerns in its mission statement that we ignore at our peril: "public libraries are not developing fast enough," and that the "social role of the library [is] not so much at the forefront of debate at working level."[8]

We need to ensure that new professionals have the skills, and the resilience, to negotiate the complex information needs of an increasingly globalised world. This means that incumbent library workers, the not-so-new professionals, should act as the sponsors and mentors to the professionals of the future, encouraging the development of an exciting and relevant public library service and one that has a central, transformative role in society.

Further information about the Quality Leaders Project – Youth can be found at The Network's website, http://www.seapn.org.uk/qlp.

REFERENCES

1. Leadbetter C. *Overdue: how to create a modern library service*. http://www.demos.co.uk/files/overdue.pdf (accessed 26 Jan 2009).
2. Lord Macintosh in CABE. *Building better libraries*. http://www.cabe.org.uk/AssetLibrary/2151.pdf (accessed 26 Jan 2009).
3. Libri. Welcome to Libri. http://www.rwevans.co.uk/libri/ (accessed 26 Jan 2009).
4. International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). IFLA Libraries success story database. http://www.tribalpixel.ch/ifla/result.php?id=147 (accessed 26 Jan 2009).
5. Every child matters: change for children. Aims and outcomes. 2005. http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/aims/ (accessed 26 Jan 2009).
6. See for example, Lewis A, editor. *Questioning library neutrality: essays from Progressive Librarian*. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2008.
7. Samek T. *Librarianship and human rights: a twenty-first century guide*. Oxford: Chandos, 2007.
8. International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). New professionals discussion group (2007-2008) http://www.ifla.org/VII/dg/npdg/ (accessed 26 Jan 2009).