Research in Education for Librarianship

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Research produces knowledge. Knowledge is needed for understanding. Understanding combined with skill leads to effective action.

It is hardly necessary to add that this neat progression from inquiry to decision is not the natural law of life. On the contrary, the process often works in reverse. Aristotle did not say that the rational life is prevalent; he simply said that it is best.

The man of action starts with decision and not with inquiry, and he may display limited understanding and actually scorn research. The intellectual lives in the sphere of understanding, gained through background and insight; he expects action to correspond with understanding (and because it does not is often at odds with life around him) and he expects research to confirm his previous insight (and because of this is often not a good research man). Confronted with a job that needs doing, the practical man acts, the intellectual reflects, only the research man investigates. This is an oversimplification, for in practice the several levels do and indeed should run together.

But this formulation reminds us that conduct based on inquiry is neither typical nor natural, but takes special effort and discipline. These distinctions provide a framework within which to place research in education for librarianship. And they serve to warn us that library education will be unusual if research has played a major role in its development.

Formal training for library service grew directly out of practice. The early librarians learned by doing. When enough individuals sought to learn at once, training classes were established within libraries. Instructional content was defined by the tasks then performed in libraries, and instructional method followed actual or simulated field conditions. When library education later moved into formal institutions of education, much the same content and method moved with it.

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If anyone thought in those early stages about the justification for
the training provided, the answer would have been found in the last
analysis in the instinctive actions of those who had determined the
pattern of library service to that time. Today, many years after on-the-
job training and training classes have passed out of the picture for
the foundation education of librarians, some practitioners still measure
library education by the extent to which graduates can perform im-
mediately in any given job. And it is worth commenting that unless
the library educator can provide a better base upon which to build
professional education, he must be prepared to meet the test of prac-
tical action. It is of little avail for him to say that there is a better
basis for instruction, in theory and principle, unless he has clearly
identified and tested that theory and principle.

With the C. C. Williamson report, background and understanding
were urged as the basis of library education, rather than practice.
Library schools moved to the centers of background and understand-
ing, the universities, and away from the centers of applied instruc-
tion, the training classes and the institutes.

For thirty years now there has been a push and pull between appli-
cation and understanding as the touchstones of library education, and
the issue is not settled yet. Too often the question is posed as one of
either theory or practice. Actually, if it is to be professional, library
education must learn how to go deeply into theory on the one hand
and how to teach skill and judgment in the application of theory on
the other, but this is the subject of another paper.

The point here is that if the schools are to depend upon theory and
understanding at all in library education—and for a quarter century
now they have increasingly adopted this approach—then the depth
and quality of instruction depends directly on its foundation in re-
search.

Not exclusively on research. Ours is a practical art, and inspiration,
intuition, sensitivity should be no more ruled out of the library class-
room than out of the library. Understanding comes from insight as
well as from investigation.

But directly on research. For the principles of librarianship estab-
lished by research are those that can actually be conveyed in the edu-
cational setting, while understanding through insight comes from the
total experience of the individual. Courses and teachers are part of
this total, but only a part. The rare teacher may inspire; every teacher
must impart content.

It is not too much to say that if research has produced a body of
tested principles in librarianship, then library education moved wisely in turning from practice to understanding. But if research has not produced sound professional theory, then library education based on instruction by principles would be at best premature and at worst downright confusing. Actually of course, some principles have been established in librarianship, and the question is whether they add up to an intellectual discipline strong enough to bear a structure of professional education.

An illustration will serve to show the difference in library education depending on the presence or absence of verified knowledge based on research. Any one who has taught or studied library administration knows the sense of security and accomplishment that comes in handling the unit on library government with the help of such a study as C. B. Joeckel's Government of the American Public Library, as compared with the uncertainty and inconclusiveness that prevails in dealing with a unit on library departmental organization where only a range of professional opinion is available. It is not that Joeckel supplies the answers for library government. He simply gives the facts for a given period, interprets these facts for their meaning, and isolates the factors that influence government one way or another. The student comes out of this unit, thanks to Joeckel, with ability to identify situations in the field, to analyze them in the light of what deserve to be called "principles," and to devise ways and means of improvement in relation to local circumstances. While it will carry us ahead of our story, it is worth remarking that one is hard pressed to find other research studies that give an equal framework of knowledge to parts of the library curriculum.

In a sense, then, the several other papers in this issue of Library Trends are part of any broad consideration of research in library education. To the extent that the various papers report a substantial body of research, library education stands on a sound foundation, and to the extent that they point to a continuing program of research the foundation will be strengthened. The other papers are therefore the most important part of any analysis of research in library education.

This paper will confine itself to a more narrow view, the research already done, and the research needed, in library education itself. The present statement will not treat the results of investigation that have been brought into the library curriculum, but rather research about library education—its purpose, structure, content, method, personnel, and results.

To what extent has the prevailing pattern of library education re-
sulted from research in the past? To what extent is library education being brought under the light of research today?

Any answer to these questions obviously calls first for consideration of what will be admitted as research. In a certain broad sense, any responsible pronouncement is based on a kind of research in that the proponent has looked around him and his conclusions are based in part upon what he has seen. In a narrow sense, research might be limited to a process of securing new and reliable data by recognized methods of investigation and of drawing conclusions limited solely to these data. For present purposes it would seem best to adopt a middle ground, admittedly ill-defined, which would admit any considerable degree of systematic study used at least partially as a basis for conclusions, but which would exclude purely personal pronouncements grounded solely in the general impressions of the individual.

On this basis, the commentary of Ralph Munn in the mid-thirties will not be included in this analysis, nor the later reports of J. L. Wheeler and J. P. Danton. The Programs for Library Schools of E. J. Reece is similarly outside the present scope, on the grounds that this is a personal attempt to project the desirable content of library education, but the same author’s earlier and later reports on the curriculum and on future training of librarians are included in that one was based on a comprehensive study of the growth of the curriculum and the other on systematic interviews with eighty librarians. Wilhelm Munthe’s pithy comments on library education? Let’s say they are somewhere on the borderline. They were based on a planned period of field study, so they are included here—possibly because for all their bite they reflect one important quality of research, balanced objectivity which sees both sides of the problem under examination.

It should not be necessary to add that exclusion of any report is not to dismiss it as worthless. The purpose here is simply to see to what extent systematic research into library education has been conducted and whether it has had an effect on the training of librarians. Nor should it be forgotten that research at best is an aid to judgment and not a substitute for judgment.

Interestingly enough, the one report that is acknowledged as having decisive influence on library education is based on research. The Williamson report set the path for university schools with instruction by means of professional principles, a path which has taken over twenty-five years for the schools to follow to the point where they can discern where it leads. He also pressed for full-time faculty mem-
bers of distinction, in place of part-time practitioners, and urged that the first year of graduate instruction should be general and basic. His tenets have increasingly prevailed in the years since. Williamson's conclusions were rooted in extensive research, including data on faculty, students, and methods. He visited all the recognized library schools of his time.

From a certain view the many articles on education for librarianship which appeared in the following years were addenda to the Williamson thesis, with intermittent spicing in the form of contrary views which often took on an aggravated, shrill tone. One review of this writing listed no less than one-hundred seventy-one books, articles, and reports on the topic in the three year period, 1936-1939. Some of the pronouncements of these and other years were reasoned critiques, from those of Leon Carnovsky, Lucile F. Fargo and Munn in the thirties to L. E. Asheim and M. F. Tauber in the fifties. Very few gained depth and significance by virtue of research, despite the fact that this was the period when the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago was bringing many aspects of library service under objective scrutiny.

The study of the curriculum by Reece in this period stands out for its thorough scholarship. He depended on literature, both primary and secondary, for the raw material of his analysis, so that his endeavor falls on the side of armchair research. Yet his material was new and he wove it together to tell a progressive story. His survey proved useful in the modest curriculum revisions of the late thirties.

Fifteen years after the data of the Williamson report, L. R. Wilson brought the picture up-to-date in a substantial article issued in 1937. He not only provided information about students, faculty, finance, and similar topics, but went a step further to examine the integration of the library instructional program with the university, and in general gave a critical review of library education in transition.

Where Reece depended on literature, Munthe went into the field, turning a fresh eye on the American library scene. Library education occupies no less than three of his nineteen chapters. Despite pointed criticism of the training of librarians, Munthe's balanced view is indicated by his summary remark, "Personally, I believe the library schools are better than their reputation." The next decade saw no diminution of writing about library education, nor very little increase in research into it, even though the schools were moving toward a major modification in programs. Helen F. Pierce produced a substantial descriptive report on post-professional educa-
tion for librarians. Increasing interest in internships was reflected in reports by F. R. St. John and Esther L. Stallman. The K. D. Metcalf, J. D. Russell and A. D. Osborn study of the University of Illinois, while a case study in a sense, raised, if it did not answer, important questions about methods of library instruction. A few years later Reece quietly dug back again to the basis of library education, this time in systematic interviews over the country with leading librarians, and came up with a conception of the librarian as an information catalyst which has never had the attention it deserves. Toward the end of the decade, the University of Chicago devoted its annual institute to library education, which resulted in a series of papers notable alike for occasional flashes of insight (R. W. Tyler on the nature of professions, C. H. Faust on pre-professional education) and for its thin research foundation.

The Public Library Inquiry took a close look at the schools, as part of its appraisal of the public library in American society at mid-century. This report contains more extensive data about library education than had been available since the Williamson and Wilson reports. It came at a strategic time, immediately after substantial curriculum changes in the post-war period. The Inquiry report pretty well accepted the current substance of library education, and focused its recommendations on questions of size, number, and distribution of schools.

Within the past year Western Reserve University has received a grant from the Carnegie Corporation (which financed no less than five of the previous periodic surveys) for a study of library education. This investigation will proceed from a re-examination of the role of the library and librarian in society today, with particular reference to contemporary needs for communication of knowledge. Thus it goes beyond what library schools are doing, and beyond what libraries are doing, and in a sense assumes that neither the schools nor the libraries completely reflect present and emerging needs. This is a challenging and experimental approach; it will test the social insight of those conducting the study and the extent to which an institution will yield to its critics.

Library education in the period here under review moved from apprentice training to graduate university education. Did research aid or abet this development? Very possibly research in the principles of librarianship fed content back into the curriculum, so that an intellectual discipline was slowly constructed. But research directly on library education—its content, method, or results—seems to have
played only a minor role. At most it aided a few compelling judgments that had a discernible influence.

It has now been thirty years since the Williamson report, twenty years since the limited curriculum adjustments of the thirties, and ten years since the substantial changes in content and degree structure in the post-war period. The American Library Association has just completed its re-accreditation program for library schools based on standards resulting from the post-war changes. This would seem to be a good time to take stock on just where education for librarianship stands, and research is a prime means to this end.

There is need, first of all, for elementary facts about library education today, to add to the sequence of reports by Williamson, Wilson, and the Public Library Inquiry. A strong case can be made for having the next survey cover all centers for education for librarianship. The profession is not agreed on such an elementary point as the number of institutions providing training, and many librarians express surprise upon learning that the number may exceed five hundred. The number of students produced by the library training agencies each year is not known. Annual statistics are gathered by the American Library Association for the accredited graduate schools, which comprise less than ten per cent of the total agencies, but the other institutions seem somehow outside the professional pale. We would do well to find out the what, where, and who of the issue which we discuss so much.

Beyond the question of how much library education is going on is that of its content. In recent years a series of surveys has been conducted by specific groups—extension librarians, special librarians, etc.—to determine attention given to their particular field. For the most part these studies have been based on course titles, catalog course descriptions, or brief questionnaires which ask about number of class hours given to specific topics. Because the information obtained is usually superficial in character, very little interpretation can be made of the returns, and these studies have usually not been published.28

Certainly the examinations of content have not gone deep enough to answer some of the basic questions about library education that are pertinent at this stage. How does professional education for librarians relate to general and subject education? What actually is the common core that all librarians need? Has the curriculum expanded to include relevant new topics? And more basic than these, in view of the assumptions underlying library education for more than a quarter century, to what extent has a body of genuine prin-
ciple been identified and woven into a discipline that deserves to be labeled both graduate and professional?

Once the imagination is open to the possibility of research as a means to examine education for librarianship, a host of problems come quickly to mind. There exists not one but several different structures of general, subject, and technical education in preparation for library service, some requiring four years and some five. Occasionally the four-year and five-year programs are integrated, so that students may move readily from one to the other in a logical progression, but more often the two run parallel without a planned connection. How does this affect recruits—how is the connection made in actual practice—can steps be taken toward an integrated structure of library education in the country? Then there is the problem of the status of the library school in the university. The university setting has long been urged. What has been the result in courses and course content taken by students, in faculty utilized in the library school, in the relation of the library student to other graduate students? Or there is the cliche of the profession, that library-school instructors become isolated from practice, and retreat into ivory towers. Does this happen, or do faculty members actually develop less provincial views when moving from a single to a broader vantage point? If they do become isolated, in what respects, and how can this be overcome? Whenever these or other problems are raised, there is no lack of definite opinion on one side or the other, but the present writer has not been able to find objective studies supporting either side of the argument.

Research would also help the schools in turning in upon themselves, to look at methods of instruction. Library schools seek to teach a disparate body of materials and to achieve a wide range of results in students—a sense of purpose, knowledge of information and bibliographic sources, technical principles, judgment in applying principles, to cite only a few of the various different aims. While different teaching methods are used, still the degree of similarity of method in teaching such different subjects as library history, cataloging, and subject literature is striking. The class size in most library schools is of the standard size, twenty to thirty students. For imparting knowledge it is possible that this is smaller than it need be, and for developing individual skill it may be too large. Experimentation with other sizes might point the way to better instruction and better utilization of staff. One need only mention a type of course that is characteristic of the new curriculum, the "literature" courses in social science, science
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and humanities, to raise a welter of questions about purpose, scope, and procedure. Library educators have seldom stepped aside to gather data which would help in selecting among methods and improving those that are used. A recent evaluation of a library school testing program is an example of one of the many areas of study. 29

One sub-topic here deserves special mention. Librarianship is an applied profession; judgment in meeting individual situations in particular circumstances is the heart of its practice. Within the schools this quality of judgment is often not highlighted; the schools stress information and method, but not the modification and adjustment of these to the individual library, book, and reader. In library education a period of applied instruction controlled in part by the schools has not been developed to any extent (the earlier “practice” periods seldom promoted and tested professional judgment) and even this has been dropped in most instances, while other professions (medicine, social work, in part teaching) see it as the capstone of their preparation of practitioners. Either it has been assumed in library education that applied judgment is achieved in regular instruction covering knowledge and methods, or that its systematic development occurs through regular programs of induction and in-service training on the job—but whatever assumption accounts for this curious gap in education for librarianship has never been tested.

Any consideration of method leads to the question of results or outcomes. This ultimate and fundamental concern of education can not easily be reduced to research, whether for youngsters learning to read or for graduate librarians learning to help others to read. Yet in librarianship there is an opportunity to follow graduates through to performance. Granting that factors other than those dealt with by the library schools enter into performance, it should be possible to gain some information first from the graduates themselves and then from their supervisors. From time to time there have been follow-up studies on graduates of library schools, such as those of the University of Denver 30 and the University of California. 81 These have been quantitative reviews of the who, what, and where of graduates, with only limited attention to the relation between training and performance; they stop short of evaluating outcomes. Columbia University conducted such a study in its recent review of curriculum, but the results have not been made generally available. By observation of performance, under controlled conditions, it should be possible to get some insight into outcomes under different structures of professional education, different curricula, and different methods of instruction.
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Thus, there is ample room for increased research into education for librarianship. The need arises not only from the general consideration that all endeavor stands to benefit from objective analysis, but more particularly from the road which library educators have elected to follow. The decision has been made to seek out the theory and principles on which professional practice rests and to base instruction upon them. It would be a sanguine person indeed who could claim that this search has been consummated. Further, when it comes to application of theory and principles, while the conclusion seems inescapable that some agency or group of agencies should give attention to it, there is no agreement on whose responsibility this is, much less on how it should be done. The very variety of aspects of librarianship, ranging from broad considerations of scholarship and social purpose to precise technical methods, poses a complicated problem for the educator.

Thorough, systematic and useful research is never easy. Yet in research into library education there exists the laboratory for investigation, in the classrooms in which the student is taught and in the libraries in which he practices what he is taught, and there exists also the investigator, in the faculty member who has responsibility for objective study. He could do worse than start his research with an examination of what he himself does. If the efforts of faculty members in the various schools were to be coordinated, by the Association of American Library Schools or other agency, within a few years the library educator could throw light not only on his own work but on the profession of which he is a part.

It would not be too extreme to say that for all their revisions of curricula and degree structures, the library schools are not quite certain where they fit into the structure of higher education, not quite certain as to the content for which they are responsible, and not quite certain about the best methods for teaching this content. This is not intended as sweeping criticism, but rather as appraisal. Indeed, it would be strange and suspect if library education were without doubt and above reproach, for education is not an endeavor that should become self-assured and unchanging. The present stage of education for librarianship simply points to a great need for continued scrutiny by means of research.

References

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10. Williamson, op. cit.


17. Reece, op. cit., ref. 7.


20. Ibid., p. 137.


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