Continuing Education: Providing for Change, Renewal, and Growth

Why should this Allerton Institute on library services for children and young adults include a session on continuing education (CE)? Are there different issues and problems associated with CE for youth services librarians than for librarians in general? If so, what are they? The task today is to explore these questions, to identify the concerns about CE, and, if agreement is reached on some specific conclusions, to contribute to the “Youth Agenda” which will be formulated at the conclusion of the conference.

From the perspective of one who administers a continuing education program which seeks to serve professionals in all types of libraries, media, and information centers, one answer to the questions just posed is no—the basic issues and problems relating to continuing education are not very different, whether one is talking about school librarians or directors of public libraries or online searchers in industry. There are differences in degree, however, and therefore the answer to the question, should we be talking about CE for youth librarians specifically, is yes. In fact, a case can be made to support the contention that youth librarians are singularly disadvantaged in regard to continuing education.

What are the problems which seem to be pervasive and to cut across types of positions and libraries? When looking at the complaints people have about continuing education, they really come from two categories of complainers. The first is a group that could be called the consumer—individuals who have an interest in their own professional development but have difficulty finding learning opportunities that match their needs and expectations. They complain—with justification—that it is hard to discover what is being offered, that little of what can be identified is relevant to their particular need at that moment, that much of what is available is superficial or poorly done, that the cost in time and money is too high, and that the encouragement and rewards that ought to accrue to the CE participant are not forthcoming.
The second group of complainers comprises a motley assemblage of CE providers, library administrators, educators, and professional profession-watchers who—again with considerable justification—blame the would-be or should-be CE consumers for failing to make enough of an effort to seek out learning opportunities, to take responsibility for their own learning, to be discriminating in their selection of CE activities, to play the Typhoid Mary role—as Regina Minudri calls it—by sharing what has been learned with colleagues back home, and especially for failing to demonstrate on the job that CE can make a difference in performance and ultimately in the quality of service for the library user.

Sometimes it seems that the profession is content with this standoff, with each camp feeling it has accomplished something by diagnosing the problem and pointing the finger at the other side. To be fair, during the last ten years there has been progress in recognizing the importance of providing for CE within the overall system of planning for the development of libraries and librarianship. Many states have included CE in statewide planning. The Continuing Library Education Network and Exchange (CLENE) has created much greater awareness of and has facilitated communication and support for CE. It has worked to improve CE by developing criteria for quality and a voluntary provider approval system. ALA’s Committee on Library Education (SCOLE) has recently established a CE subcommittee, which is cooperating with CLENE (now a round table of ALA) in an effort to have ALA approve the CLENE CE quality criteria as ALA guidelines. SCOLE is working to improve headquarters’ support for an association-wide CE role. Such support could help AASL, ALSC, and YASD to serve better the CE needs of their members.

In an article which will be published in the forthcoming Winter issue of *Top of the News* (Varlejs, 1987), it is argued that the ALA youth divisions should be doing much more in the area of continuing education, but that they cannot do what is needed without help from the association as a whole. In order to get help, they will have to form a coalition and fight for it.

Very briefly, this is the argument. Despite the good job the divisions do with offering programming at conferences, the impact is not very great because few practitioners attend, at least relative to their total numbers. Publications, cassettes, and now videotapes reach a wider audience and are enormously useful in helping librarians to keep up to date and to continue learning at their own pace at little cost and inconvenience. Praiseworthy as all these services are, however, they fall far short of what should be available considering the great number of things a youth services librarian needs to know and do. Moreover, the disparity in basic preparation is quite large, and therefore one has to keep in mind the needs of practitioners who have few, if any, courses in materials and library services for youth. This is not as
serious a problem for school as for public librarians—because of certification requirements—but there is still enormous variation in the entry-level preparation. In New Jersey, for example, it is possible to be certified as an educational media specialist—i.e., school librarian—if one has a masters in educational media. Most of the people who hold this degree have never had a course in cataloging nor in children’s literature.

In addition to these remedial and survival CE needs, there is a third level which might be called the parachute category. Career ladders for youth librarians are limited, but there are some rungs which allow increased responsibility without having to leave the specialty—positions such as system or regional coordinator or consultant (which require a new set of skills).

Given these several categories and different levels, not to mention the considerable overlap with education and with child and adolescent development, listing all the knowledge, skill, and attitude areas that CE for youth services librarians ought to cover becomes a formidable task. If one did take a few weeks to develop the list and then matched it against what is actually being offered—not just by ALA but throughout the country by local associations, state library agencies, library schools, and other providers—one would end up with a very lopsided list. Judging from calendars of events published in some of the widely read journals, most CE identified as designed for youth services librarians is either book or microcomputer oriented.

What is available, or at least that which is easily identified as available, simply is not enough. There is very little on planning or evaluating services, on child or adolescent development, on managing a school library or public library youth services department in a retrenchment era, on how children process information, or on the role of reading in an electronic age.

In this last statement is the implication that knowledge of how children process information, for example, is indeed important for youth services librarians, and that it therefore constitutes a CE need. How can one say that? Has there been a valid and reliable study of a randomly selected sample of practitioners? No, but it is possible to perceive the increasing interest in children’s information processing by browsing through the literature, talking with people, attending conferences, and keeping an eye on what is going on in the world at large to note new ideas and social phenomena which might have implications for librarians. These are legitimate ways for a CE provider to do CE needs assessment. It is not scientific and rigorous, but it does keep one alert to the changing environment so that needs can be anticipated and new learning activities can be ready at the moment that a particular need is just beginning to crystallize. It is a way of trying to nudge the profession forward, to help it be proactive rather than merely reactive.
But this way of doing CE needs assessment by hunch should never stand alone—it should supplement the basic and most essential kinds of needs assessment that each librarian must do for herself, using the best available checklists of competencies for the position she holds. The school library field has the Case and Lowrey Behavioral Requirements Analysis Checklist (Case, 1973); YASD has produced a list of competencies for YA librarians (American Library Association, 1982); and the New York Library Association has adapted the YASD list so that children's librarians can also use it (Young, 1985). In this regard, the youth services library field is ahead of most of the profession.

However, as suggested at the outset, youth librarians can be seen as suffering certain disadvantages in continuing their education. As has already been concluded, what is offered does not match the range of needs. Not mentioned as yet are the problems caused by the relative isolation of youth services librarians, and the effect this has on their ability to take strong action to improve their access to appropriate CE. For the most part, the school librarian is the only librarian in his/her school, and often in his/her town. This is certainly also true of the children's librarian. As for the YA librarian, if there is one, she or he probably is the only one of the species for many miles around. In the typical situation, there are not enough people to form the sized group which makes the traditional workshop or short course format viable. Self-assessment and self-directed learning are almost the only routes available.

On the other hand, because they have made good progress toward identifying the competencies required for their specialities, youth services librarians are in a good position to define the content of the CE "curriculum" which they need. In addition, because they know that their colleagues throughout the country are often isolated from their peers and from professional support groups, underpaid and overworked, they can be quite confident in recommending that this curriculum needs to be very portable, flexible, and affordable. It will not do much good if it is offered once a year in Chicago or wherever ALA is meeting. This curriculum must be available on loan, in formats varied to suit the topic and different individual learning styles, paced for self-study but adaptable for small groups, geared to beginners as well as advanced learners.

If one thinks about what it would take to develop this kind of "mail-order" CE, it has to be admitted that it would require a very large investment in resources to develop and maintain. No single state library agency, library school, state professional association, or ALA division by itself is likely to have the staff and money required. If the profession really wants this kind of program, a way to pool resources has to be found. ALA is the only organization which is big enough to harbor such an effort. The youth services divisions of ALA have usually felt themselves to be underdogs
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within the ALA power structure. This need not be the case if they form a strong alliance and work toward specific objectives which will benefit the profession at large as well as youth services. Working for an agenda that calls for stronger support from the organization for the CE efforts of the divisions seems be an effective way to exercise some clout to good effect.

Summary/Recommendations

The idea of mail-order CE has potential for alleviating the inadequate supply of CE for youth services librarians. It is felt, however, that interaction is essential, and that solitary self-directed learning cannot be the only mode. A great deal is gained from discussion with others in groups. Uses of new technology to bridge distance and permit interaction should be explored.

ALA should experiment with several learning packages to test the response. There should be programs for paraprofessionals as well as for professionals. A possible model might be the learning modules recently developed for staff training in the Area 2 Library Services Authority in Indiana. Another model is the CE course by Jane Robbins-Carter and Douglas Zweizig which ran in American Libraries from October 1985 through February 1986.

In addition to the facilitating of programs and packages, ALA should ensure better communication and an enlarged clearinghouse function for CE. There should be more exchange of information about existing programs and resources which could be shared if people knew about them.

NOTES


