
Staffing Rural Public Libraries: The Need to Invest in Intellectual Capital

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ABSTRACT

A WIDE RANGE OF PEOPLE are just beginning to equate information service in their communities with the institution they once believed served a primarily recreational and educational function—the public library. At present, many rural libraries have inadequate numbers of staff, and many others have staff which are seriously undereducated to meet the expanded information needs of the people in their communities.

If rural libraries are to seize the opportunities suggested by the developing positive view, develop services to support this view, and market such a view to a wider range of citizens in their communities, they must invest in the intellectual capital of their staffs. The benefits which technology promises for rural people to access information and education could also be the key for developing rural public library staff to provide those resources and services.

INTRODUCTION

Before ever considering the problems associated with staffing the rural public library, the question, Do we really need rural public libraries? should be answered. Vavrek (1993), whose insightful scholarship and unquestioned commitment to the profession and to rural people, forces this question to be considered. If current use equates need, according to his research, then perhaps we do not need public libraries in rural areas. On the other hand, if it is a matter of the institution called “library” simply not being perceived as an important information resource by rural

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citizens, and that institution having the potential to be changed, nurtured, and adapted to meet more of the daily needs of real people, perhaps libraries are far more important than even Vavrek's obvious optimism would have us believe.

IMPORTANT LIBRARIES/CHANGING LIBRARIES

It may be merely optimistic and idealistic for individuals with a vested interest to hope for the continuation of the institution called "library," but there appears to be a goodly number of scholars and practitioners who affirm that libraries and librarians have a future. For example, in a recent report from the Committee on Applications and Technology, the writers conclude that: "Libraries are central to the success of the NII [National Information Infrastructure]" (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 1994, p. 99). This has the potential of being a powerful statement if those in the profession accept a leadership role in implementing it at the national and local levels. Reading only a few issues of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* will show a fairly secure future for academic libraries, which are described as essential to the application and implementation of the NII to learning and teaching in higher education. While they may be euphemistically labeled as "knowledge centers" or "information departments" in the literature of large business and industry, the organizational and service knowledge of librarians is critical to success in this arena as well. But what about small businesses, which account for nearly 70 percent of our tax base, which cannot afford libraries and library staff regardless of what term is used to describe them? What about people who cannot afford to own a computer or who lack the essential skills to make use of one? To some extent, the free net or community information network has been suggested as filling that gap. If one looks at the organizational structure of most of the successful free nets or community information networks, the public library holds a significant position organizationally and structurally.

From the more traditional perspective of providing books to readers, especially children and young people, the work of Krashen (1993) clearly indicates that the more kids read the better they will do academically in reading, writing, and vocabulary skills. Where else but libraries can parents get the full range of books to help their children to come to school ready to learn, and where can they turn to continue to reinforce these essential skills? Where else but the public library is there a central information service to support learning and decision making at all levels?

D'Elia and Rodger (1994) conclude that: "[t]here appear to be three fundamental roles of the library in the community: educational support, provision of information, and recreation" (p. 136). Although this study was completed in large urban areas, the transfer value should be considered for rural public libraries as well.

A future with public libraries as institutions which are central to the success of the NII, central for preschool and lifelong learning, and central to the success of the citizens in the communities they serve requires a radical change in both the services libraries can provide and the perceptions of citizens toward those libraries. To do so, "the library must change from a fortress to a pipeline" (Dowlin, 1993, p. 37) and be seen as a service rather than a place (Vavrek, 1993, p. 10). Or, as Penniman (1993) says: "It is clear that libraries must be viewed, first and foremost, as information delivery systems, not warehouses" (p. 10). To make these changes in service, use, perception, and appreciation, rural public libraries—perhaps all public libraries—need help.

CHANGING LIBRARIES/STAFFING NEEDS

Whatever the future of the rural public library, the burden of survival and growth is laid firmly upon the shoulders of the staff of those libraries. While this may appear to be "blaming the victim" given the political nature of public library funding, or the lack of funding, the local staff will be the deciding factor in the death or glory of rural public libraries.

A review of the literature from the past ten years shows a fairly consistent pattern of concerns and issues about staffing. Articles on staff evaluation, staff participation in planning, and staffing patterns frequently occur, however, the vast majority of such articles focus on larger urban libraries. In articles devoted to rural library staff, most writers point to concerns and problems which can be traced almost always to staff education. Marketing, services to special populations, technology, and recruitment all can be crystallized under the heading of "educational needs." How to effectively incorporate the time of volunteers, day care for staff children, and benefits package selection have all been discussed, but education, sometimes referred to as training, is the single most common thread which may be found in the literature treating rural library staffing.

Traditionally, many rural public libraries owe their beginnings to the good will and community spirit of citizens who practically donated their time to the daily operations of the library. Personal observation over the past twenty years and anecdotal records in the literature can paint glowing pictures of the dedication and love of community many library staff members have who work with rural populations. But, today, only 54 percent of librarians and 19 percent of staff in libraries serving communities considered to be rural (i.e., 25,000 people or fewer) have an ALA-MLS (Chute, 1994, p. 29). How can a staff with such an educational deficit be expected to accomplish all that will be demanded to enable their libraries to go beyond being a warehouse of popular reading materials? How can we expect them to "change from pointers and retrievers to organizers and facilitators" (Dowlin, 1993, p. 36)? As Vavrek (1993) points out:

"The education/training deficiency is so enormous and present methods are so inadequate that they can not possibly cope with future challenges as currently configured" (p. 27). Ford (1994) continues this theme with:

The reality too often is inadequate local collections, minimally trained rural librarians, and a cumbersome delivery system. It should be no surprise that rural residents' expectations of the library as a source of daily information are usually much lower than their needs. (p. 34)

Childers (1994) offers his suggestions for meeting the current "reference crisis" in California when he writes in a section of his article: "Larger than local solutions....Train, train, train" (p. 35). While he may be speaking of public libraries in general, the rural public library certainly exists in California.

Among the characteristics Ford (1994) lists, "that will distinguish those rural public libraries which successfully provide 21st century reference service" is training for library boards and staff. Both groups must "obtain the training and continuing education that enable them to understand, plan for, and use new technologies and ways of providing library service. Training and experience in planning and managing change are also critical for those involved with libraries" (p. 40).

In a study of library directors and educators to determine the primary issues and concerns they believed to be most critical to the profession, Greiner (1994) found that "technological advances" rose to the top (p. 204). Couple her findings with those suggested by just considering the titles of the articles included in this journal, and there is little room to doubt that education must be among the top, if not the top, staffing concern the profession must face smartly and squarely.

STAFFING NEEDS=LEARNING COMMUNITY

While the author agrees with Childers's concept, the difference between training and education must be carefully articulated if rural staffs are to enjoy a future of problem solving and decision making for themselves and their communities. This difference is well articulated in a *Fortune* magazine article by Stewart (1994): "Your Company's Most Valuable Asset: Intellectual Capital." Training is an old Winslow Taylor educationistic school solution which must be quickly forgotten for all levels of the work force if we are to take full advantage of those who represent the company's future. In the case of rural public libraries, the work force will include a wide range of educational levels, yet each person must be seen as having the potential of going beyond the automaton concept of merely following patterns to that of an "intrapreneur." As Peters (1994) says: "Becoming a member of a community of practice is literally a requirement of

modern-day job success" (p. 174). He quotes Stucky of the Institute for Research on Learning, "Learning is the process of becoming a member of a community of practice. The motivation to learn is the motivation to become a member" (Stucky quoted in Peters, 1994, p. 174).

As we make justifiable distinctions between and among the various educational levels in our profession, it is essential that we concentrate our efforts to make each library a learning community. For nearly 50 percent of our rural public libraries that should include helping the directors to obtain the MLS and helping them provide their staffs with regular programs of education which may or may not be degree related but will match the needs of the libraries and the communities.

A POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO THE EDUCATION DILEMMA: THE VIRTUAL CAMPUS

Encouraging the development of learning communities requires more than providing the staff with a workshop or two and asking that they read Senge (1990). Rather, it requires an initial investment with ongoing nurturing which one library, one regional library system, or even one state library system cannot meet independently. Continuing education has also been delegated to professional associations through their journals, conferences, and workshops. While this will remain an essential component of the profession's continued renewal, it cannot be expected solely to meet the educational demands of current and future rural public library staffs.

Dowlin (1993) issues a challenge to library schools "to provide a systemic, integrated curriculum to the beginner, to provide the programs for the architects of the library of the future, and to create a lifelong learning environment" (p. 37). If we expect the current configuration of "library schools" to meet independently the needs of library and information providers, we are expecting the impossible. Assuming that each "library school" has a commitment to all types of libraries and information service agencies, they are just not geographically located nor staffed at levels which could logically be expected to successfully meet Dowlin's challenge, even within the limited area they currently serve.

One solution which could pull local libraries, state library agencies, professional associations, and programs of library and information science education together to commemoratively meet the challenge of initial and continuing education is to create a virtual campus for library and information studies through distance education.

DISTANCE EDUCATION: CREATING THE VIRTUAL CAMPUS

The virtual classroom has been a reality for many years as telecommunications technology has made it possible for the teacher and learner to share an experience similar to that of a traditional classroom. As the

technology has changed and provided for a broader range of opportunities for interaction, the debate as to just what constitutes distance education has smoldered and often flared up in debates.

Educators have seized the opportunities provided by each communications revolution from the use of roads to extend the campuses of Oxford and Cambridge in the 1850s to the use of the mail systems in the late 1800s and early 1900s to provide correspondence study in a wide range of disciplines and for a wide diversity of populations. Telephones, radio, and television were hardly weaned from their developers before women and men, whose vision of society's needs and commitment to those people not able to attend the traditional campus, applied these new systems to education (Barron, 1993).

Critics have often questioned the legitimacy of correspondence study for its seemingly impersonal and nondirect interaction of teacher and student. As the various telecommunications systems have been put into use, they have contended that distance education is simply a euphemism for an electronic version of correspondence study. Even live and interactive television classes have been characterized as little more than "talking heads." Those using television have countered with, "What's the difference between a talking head and a stalking head?" alluding to the fact that much of what the critics contend as being underactive teacher/student interaction is hardly more than a teacher-centered, front of the room, presentation with teacher talking and learners listening.

Such arguments are not very productive because, as is in most cases, each party's assault is somewhat correct. However, a revolution is taking place across the spectrum of education. This revolution is one in which the focus is placed on the learner and not the teacher. The words *collaborative* and *cooperative* are used to characterize learning in which the student is an active participant in every aspect of the learning/teaching partnership. Some have suggested that the role of the teacher has changed from that of "Sage on the Stage" to "Guide on the Side."

In the past, each new technology or each new "teaching system" was touted as *the* way to teach better, when in fact, most were merely changing the package but approaching the teaching/learning relationship very much the same as that practiced conventionally. Thomas Edison once said that the moving picture would replace books in teaching, yet books remain one of the most important resources in education. It has been predicted that programmed instruction would replace the lecture and provide independence for learners. Lectures and face-to-face instruction remain very valuable techniques for certain learning/teaching activities.

Television was heralded as the best way to let master teachers teach the masses, perhaps even replace teachers in certain areas. Today we know that television can supplement and be integrated into the work of master

teachers, but it cannot replace them. The power of computers to revolutionize education has most often gone into drill and practice programs aimed at the lowest levels of rote learning.

The current revolution has a more holistic approach to the teaching/learning relationship. Just as Newton's Laws remain as valid in the age of quarks and chaos as they were when he first proposed them, new techniques and technologies are being accommodated into the full range of approaches to quality education. The traditional classroom is quickly becoming less and less "traditional" as converging and complementary technologies are being used by educators using converging and complementary techniques.

This revolution is more easily comprehended by those who have been involved with distance education than by those who have not become as actively involved with the new and emerging technologies and their applications to education. An example of converging technologies is a "televised" class which depends not just on cameras and cable, but on computers, satellites, telephone systems, and fiber optics to provide a learning/teaching opportunity. Complementary technologies are those which should be in place to support the entire learning/teaching process. For example, a class session may depend upon a live interactive teacher-centered presentation with discussion. This one session must be examined within the context of pre-class and post-class activities which may be illustrated by the following scenario: The teacher designs a course (for academic credit or continuing inservice education) based on the anticipated needs of the learners. She or he determines what initial readings, books, video programs, or other preclass preparations are needed. Some of these materials may be made available through a textbook, book of readings, television broadcasting system, gopher or other computer system-based information retrieval system, or from a local library or a virtual library. During the class, the teacher may lecture and use a full range of visuals including videotapes, still pictures, computer generated graphics, or handwritten notes. Learners may be asked to cluster in small groups to discuss the various ideas presented by the preclass preparation and in-class presentation, proctor each other in comprehension quizzes, or complete journals and study guide outlines. As a full group, the class may discuss the topics raised in the small group discussions, exchange questions and answers related to course content or processes related to follow-up or assignments through two-way audio or two-way audio and video technologies. After class, the learners may cluster locally in small groups to complete assignments or discuss issues related to the course. They might participate in listserv discussions with other learners who may be in the class or with members of the professional or discipline-centered community. They may explore the rich resources online related to the topics of the

course or class via the Internet, locally through community information systems, or nationally and internationally. They may send drafts of assignments to the teacher or each other by way of e-mail, fax, or snail mail as they accept mutual responsibility for learning. They may also go into virtual libraries for citations, full texts of documents, or to request books and other resources to be sent to them via e-mail or snail mail. Final exams may be distributed and proctored in real time by instructors, and projects jointly critiqued by the teacher, learners, or outside experts. Learners may attend related lectures, teleconferences, and demonstrations by way of television, compressed video, or online discussion.

This scenario will quickly become archaic as the various technologies are made more readily available, affordable, and acceptable, and as educators experiment with and adapt these technologies to the ways people learn best. However, the scenario represents an educational experience which is possible now and whose components have been tested and validated in a wide range of situations and with a wide range of learners. It is now up to educators in all disciplines to put the various pieces together for their particular communities.

A number of library and information studies programs have responded to some educational needs using many of the elements described in the scenario above, yet less than 20 percent are using any type of distance education (Barron & Sykes, 1994). In a recent survey of state library agencies, the author found that, although only ten currently provide continuing education for their public libraries through telecommunications technology, all but one indicated that they would like to be able to do so and would take advantage of quality education delivered via such technologies (Barron, 1994). The Library and Information Science Distance Education Consortium (LISDEC), which began as a service to provide graduate credit courses, refocused its mission to include continuing education for all levels of staff and moved graduate credit courses to the background. In 1993-1994, LISDEC provided four teleconferences primarily for school library media specialists, and projects five additional teleconferences for 1994-1995. A few professional associations and consortia have produced teleconferences, yet no systematic plan has been provided to assure ongoing activities in these areas.

CONCLUSION

Vavrek (1993), in a rare moment of pessimism, asks a concluding question in his study: "Is it possible, that in addition to all of the challenges facing the future of library services, that effective solutions are being denied because of a lack of confidence about the importance of libraries from within the ranks of librarians? Wow" (p. 38)! Wow, indeed!

Is it possible that we are perpetuating this lack of confidence through a failure to reach into the lives of current rural public library staff with appropriate, affordable, and accessible education? Tehranian (1990) speaks eloquently about the importance of the use of technology to reach into the lives of people in developing countries:

the synergistic effects of information also present a challenge to the more developed countries to share their scientific and technological know-how with the less developed world. A more informed, developed, and equitable world will be a more peaceful world. The challenge before us is, therefore, not so much to foresee as to empower" (p. 18).

If we substitute the concept of rural libraries for that of developing nations, do we not have a similar obligation to the people in our own country? If we do not reach out with every available technology, are we not denying rural public library staff, and, just as critical, the communities they serve, access to information and education which are the basis for economic development, cultural maintenance, and personal satisfaction? It seems that the needs are obvious, the systems are in place, and the potential promising for the profession to invest in the single most important aspect of its future in the intellectual capital of its members.

NOTE

1 See for example:

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION MAY BE OBTAINED FROM:

- American Center for the Study of Distance Education, Penn State University, 403 South Allen Street, Suite 206, State College, PA 16801-5202). Supports the online discussion group, DEOS-L. Join with a message to LISTSERV@PUSVM.PSU.EDU (message: Subscribe DEOS-L firstname lastname).
- Institute for Distance Learning. The University of the State of New York, Regents College, 7 Columbia Circle, Albany, New York 12203. 518/464-8765.
- Institute for the Transfer of Technology to Education, National School Boards Association, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. 703/838-6722.
- International Centre for Distance Learning at the UK Open University database is open for free access. Telnet to [acsvax.open.ac.uk](telnet://acsvax.open.ac.uk). At the welcome message, login to the Open University VAX cluster with the Username: [icdl](telnet://icdl). We would then like you to access the database using your country name as the account code. Please enter this without any spaces. The password is then just AAA. If you have any difficulty or want to comment, please send e-mail to n.ismail@open.ac.uk or l.r.a.melton@open.ac.uk. The Open University can also be reached via: Janet number 000041500030, EuropaNET

204334504891, Geonet da 23428440015630 or OU-VAX Library and Information Science Distance Education Consortium (LISDEC), Dan Barron, Coordinator, College of Library and Information Science, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208. 803/777-4825, fax: 803/777-7938 or e-mail <Dan.Barron@SCarolina.Edu>.

National Distance Learning Center: Owensboro Community College, 4800 New Hartford Road, Owensboro, KY 42303. 502/686-4558.