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### **The Cultural Dimension in Library Education**

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Librarians play an indispensable part in the communication of culture. By opening with such a sweeping statement, commonsensical as it may seem to this audience, I wish to focus not only on what comes readily to mind, such as the promotion of fiction in public libraries. That is important, and I will return to this point later. But culture is of course also science, and includes research within technology, natural sciences and social studies.

I want to draw attention to the fact that librarians deal with communication and therefore with texts in the broadest sense of the word. That is to say: texts whether they are communicated through printed or digital media. Text in this sense of the word includes not only verbal language texts, read with the eye or the ear, but also texts as images or music, and texts combining a whole spectre of expressions, like film or data games, be they educational or entertainment or both.

Texts of all kinds may profitably be viewed as evaluative rejoinders to contemporary situations or voices in the present and past. They are utterances or speech acts expressing a position in a particular social landscape and a certain sphere of activity. They are also links in

a chain of communication, neither the first nor the last word on a topic, always dependent on a cultural context, be it institutional or private.

Texts are also always addressed to someone. They carry a picture of the addressee, the model reader, as Umberto Eco prefers to name her. Texts are situated in all senses of the word. They carry implicit information, easy to fill in by the reader familiar with the context, cryptic for the outsider. Still, as we know, texts do not communicate before they have a real and living reader and listener, perceiving the text from his or her very specific historical, social and individual experience. Texts are merely dead words or signs, until a reader or user brings them to life in her perception.

My question is: how can librarians handle this extremely complex reality imbuing the material stored and organized in the library, without studying culture, communication and texts?

In my opinion, an education merely concentrating on the techniques of document retrieval, classification and knowledge organisation, subjects which are often named the core or kernel fields of library and information science, cannot adequately prepare the students for the challenges of their future profession. Computer science and knowledge management, indispensable as they are, need a supplement from text and communication theory and social studies. I would like to pose the question whether an exclusive concentration on the kernel subjects mentioned, might even contribute to isolate the librarians from the fields of activity with which they should communicate. It is my belief that literary, medial and cultural studies help to open up the channels between librarians and their users.

The library educations in Norway and Denmark have followed such lines of reasoning in the development of their curriculum. Presenting experiences and models from this Scandinavian example today, I hope to inspire the discussion of what should be the basic ingredients in a library and information study. Although my focus must necessarily be on the cultural dimension, I hope to avoid the conventional but very unfruitful dichotomy between technology and humanistic disciplines.

### **The social dimension**

I would like to start with claiming that knowledge of the social world structuring the life of the patrons and forming the institutions that influence library politics, is indispensable for the future librarian. Librarians are agents in the field of cultural production. In order to act rationally and strategically in this complex field of activity, librarians must have knowledge and understanding of the forces at work in the field. Librarians are intermediates between the producers and consumers in this sphere of activity, and consciousness of the challenges and dilemmas of this in-between position are important for confident action and political influence.

A librarian cannot be ignorant of the specific power executed by mass media. Of particular relevance is still the understanding of the forces at work in the book market with its influential agents and institutions. The tension between commercial and non-commercial agents, the relative autonomy of the field and the influence of the literary norms, stemming from the dominant positions in the field, give frames of reference and insight into the reality defining the libraries' space of action. In the Scandinavian model of library education, studies of the policies and positions of the literary field are indispensable.

In this context, official cultural politics play a regulating role. During the past hundred years, changing ideologies and policies have defined the responsibilities of particularly the public libraries in different ways, thus staking out the course for library strategies. Today new norms develop. Knowledge of these changing frames of thought gives a certain distance, helping the student to view the current situation in a perspective. The policies regulating library activities are seen as a matter of choice, not nature, thus preparing the future librarian for a changing society. The historical perspective is important. It clarifies how communication, genres and utterances change with changing technology, and highlights how the dominating way of looking at culture is historically and socially constructed. The understanding of culture in previous epochs has given other ways of looking at literature, art and science.

The field of cultural *production* is one part of the cultural world. The field of *consumption* is another. Understanding reception is, as far as I can see, indispensable for the librarian, who must always be oriented towards the audience. In order to navigate well in the cultural world to which she belongs, the librarian must understand the forces influencing not only the production, but also the use of cultural products. Reception includes knowledge of the changing cultural habits and lifestyles of different social groups, crossed through by age and gender preferences. It also includes a consciousness of the multiplicity of discourses at work in the intellectual and scientific world. This many-faceted reality cannot be studied in depth within the frames of a library education, but awareness of the complexity of reception, taste and interpretation may be conveyed through theory and case-studies.

In this connection I would like to point to the fact that library education should not only prepare the student for the practical professional world, but also for the world of research. Audience and reader studies are of particular interest for the professions holding a mediating role, and the basic library education should in my opinion have components which may be expanded in advanced library studies. Reception studies and research on the social distinctions in participation in culture represent a field which lends itself to such an expansion.

### **The textual dimension**

I would now like to turn to the second aspect of the librarian's cultural education: the study of texts. The demand for qualified personnel who can critically evaluate the masses of qualified and unqualified information is steadily growing, and the librarian is daily called upon to discern between relevant and irrelevant texts. This means that the study of texts in a rhetorical and pragmatic context is of the utmost importance. In a library setting, you are usually confronted with verbal language texts, distributed in print or digital media. In the Scandinavian educational model, we have therefore our main focus on verbal language texts, but also offer possibilities to study other media. We stress the semiotic aspects which make the analytic approach to verbal text transferable to other expressions.

The study of factual and fictional texts has a many-faceted goal. One is to train the mentioned ability to evaluate and discriminate. Such a competence is necessary to meet the challenges of reference work, acquisition and discarding policies. A librarian must be able to sort out and recommend texts according to the demands of the borrower. To meet such challenges, the librarian's analytic competence must be developed. Working analytically with texts trains critical thought and an analytic mind.

A second goal is to develop the communicative competence of the future librarian. The mediation and promotion of information and literature calls for the ability to communicate well, orally and in writing. It is well documented that the study of literature contributes to improve language and enhances the ability to express complicated matters. The ability to listen, interpret and understand needs cultivation.

Communicating well with library users is one aspect of the challenges confronting the librarian. Another is the increasing requirement to participate in the public debate. We believe that it is necessary for the status of librarians that they are visible and audible as agencies of culture. There is an inextricable relationship between language and power. Librarians have fundamental values like freedom of speech and democracy to defend, and there is an abundance of examples from the past and present where librarians have had to stand up for such values. In a society dominated by commercial interests librarians, particularly in public libraries, must often defend their institution against economic cut-backs and legitimate their activity. In this connection I would like to mention the value of not only mastering the discourses of one's own field, but also feel sufficiently confident in relation to the speech-genres of other social fields.

But the study of language and literature not only develops the analytic and interpretive competence and not only increases the communicative ability. It is also a goal in itself. To be educated and informed gives perspective to new literary trends and increases your ability to orient yourself in today's overflow of information. Cultural capital is a great resource, not only when it comes to establishing a position in social space, but also when it comes to finding self-confidence and basic trust in your ability to meet the challenges of your profession. Libraries represent our collective memory, and the librarian needs – not necessarily detailed knowledge of the textual canon of her cultural sphere – but a general orientation of literature and epochs, beyond the often fragmented information given in public education. This orientation should include the possibility to become familiar with different modes of expression, media and genres.

For the students preparing for a position in public libraries such competence is of particular importance. Here the study of *fictional* texts, novels, poetry and short-stories, both popular and intellectually demanding, plays a special role. In Scandinavia the loaning out of fiction in public libraries constitutes more than half of the total loans. This means that very many users still come to the library to find these kinds of reading experience. By incorporating the study of fiction in the library education, the Norwegian and Danish colleges aim not only at increasing the literary capital of their students but also prepare the librarian-to-be for an active mediating role. Only the knowledgeable and well oriented librarian can fill such a role satisfactorily.

### **The role of the mediator**

Till now I have talked about how the study of culture, social contexts and texts can give the future librarians the necessary orientation and knowledge to execute their profession well. I have also pointed at the extra profit the study of literature gives when it comes to improving language and the ability to communicate. In addition I have stressed the very important social and personal gain which in-depth reading, knowledge of literature and accumulated cultural capital gives.

But the Norwegian education also offers actual training in promoting different kinds of literature and texts. To mediate information and literature is a professional competence in itself and craves knowledge of mediating techniques and experience with performing in different settings. Again the self-confidence of the librarian is at stake. If you cannot feel that you master some basic ways of marketing what the library has to offer, the activity and visibility of the library will suffer. Today the necessity of being visible, profiled and inviting is more important than ever.

The promotion of literature and information has, of course, many facets. It has to do both with visibility and accessibility. Thinking along such lines, even physical and practical aspects like architecture and opening hours are relevant to the topic. But for education, the training of the ability to master written and oral modes of expression is of particular interest. Whether the information about and recommendation of literature is done electronically or in newspaper articles, in folders or texts following exhibitions in the library, the librarian needs to refine the ability to express herself clearly, economically and appealing in writing. The study of rhetorics and communication theory is most relevant, and the opportunity to practice the writing of mediating texts must be given. Through such training, the consciousness of the addressivity of the text and how it communicates with the library user is heightened. The sensitivity for language is not a natural gift for most people, and it may always be developed.

That goes for the ability to communicate orally as well. Most librarians come in direct contact with their patrons and need to have words and language to recommend literature and information in a way that comes through. Whether the setting is a reference interview or the recommendation of a good read, mastering oral communication well is indispensable. But for most librarians the real challenge comes when they are called to stand before an audience. In the Norwegian educational model, the students may choose to specialize in literary studies and the promotion of literature during the third year of their bachelor study. Students who want to work in school and public libraries very often choose this option. These students have to not only perform before their peers, receiving feed back for their presentations. They also have to plan and carry out cultural arrangements and book talks for other audiences, such as school classes, groups of library users, organisations or employees in different kinds of work-places. The idea is that the literary competence should always be put to practical use. It has greater value when it is communicated to others.

Practicing communication may also take the form of making exhibitions, physically and virtually. Learning to make good web-sites as well as designing good book-exhibits in the library is part of the cultural dimension in the Scandinavian educational model. Large libraries and information centres may have specialists to take care of such tasks, but in smaller units the librarian is often responsible for this part of the promotion herself. The more professionally this visual presentation is done, the more inviting the resources of the library will seem.

Cultural consciousness, communicative ability and literary competence, those may be seen as the three main building stones of the cultural dimension in library education. In the Scandinavian model, these elements are built into the library and information study in a variety of ways, making a web of interdisciplinary treads where social sciences, humanistic fields and technical skills go into the texture. We believe that this has given us an education with the necessary diversity and flexibility to meet the challenges of the libraries of today and tomorrow.