Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

The Chiasmus of Librarianship and Collaborative Research for Evidence Based Practice

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Introduction

It is my contention librarianship will experience throughout much of the twenty-first century a profound chiasmus or flip from the universal homogeneity of values and practice currently dominating the profession, to the particularistic heterogeneity characteristic of nineteenth century librarianship. This transformation will arise out of the necessity to meet the needs of specific communities and their unique ways of knowing through the collaborative development of evidence based practice for multiple knowledge systems. The paper concludes that if evidence based practice is to make a substantive contribution to this the chiasmus of librarianship it will need to embrace research methodologies developed in collaboration with multiple communities of knowing.

From particularistic heterogeneity to universal homogeneity

Up to the closing decades of the nineteenth century, library practice was locally orientated to meet the needs of specific communities. As there were no professional associations or institutions promulgating national values, standards or methodology it was a time of much experimentation. Consequently, library practice was heterogeneous, responding to the needs of particular communities. This heterogeneous environment began to change as a result of the unprecedented acceleration of social, economic and technological developments during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The creation of a political, economic and cultural mass society was in the making. One consequence of this change was the creation of a sufficient critical mass of

libraries and practitioners to launch the professionalizing of librarianship. As other professions, foremost medicine, made science the foundation of their professional legitimacy, librarianship also adopted this strategy.

Since the eighteenth century, science was gaining in ascendancy as the prevailing way of knowing among advanced western countries. With the beginning of the twentieth century, science was close to achieving the status of the dominant way of knowing. Because of its significant contributions to World War II military efforts, science gained immense power as the prevailing knowledge system. The scientific way of knowing strives to formulate universal laws culminating in a universal theory of everything. Toward this end, science adheres to strict methods of experimentation, hierarchical taxonomies and controlled vocabularies. Its ethos, then, embodies universality, rationality and efficiency. As science became accepted as the superior way of knowing other ways were characterized as subjective, irrational myths or unverifiable intuitions and their communities of knowing marginalized.

The scientific valuing of universality and rationale efficiency became hallmarks of librarianship. Indeed, the Father of Librarianship, Melvil Dewey, had an obsessive mania for promoting efficiency. Librarianship became committed to universally applied homogeneous values, techniques, and bureaucratic efficiency. Echoing science, librarians dreamed of creating the universal library of everything (a dream they now share with Google Inc.). Encouraged by emerging professional associations and university

based training programs, library staff became local representatives of a larger cosmopolitan ethos infused with a universal, scientific rationality. By the 1930s, library practice was promoted as a library *science*; schools of library economy became schools of library science.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the drive for homogenization led to ever greater centralization and standardization in the practice of librarianship. Individual libraries were incorporated into ever larger administrative jurisdictions, consortia and networks. Striving for greater efficiencies, methods and services were developed remote from any substantive input by local library clientele or from those with their own ways of knowing. When knowledge generated by communities embracing other ways of knowing and organizing knowledge could not be easily incorporated into librarianship's science-based framework, they were marginalized or ignored.

The movement promoting evidence based library and information practice is a significant effort to strengthen the link between research and practice. However, it is crucial, in my mind, for those promoting evidence based practice to consider its methodology in the larger context of the transformation of librarianship; that is, a shift back to heterogeneous library practice arising out of the recognition there are multiple communities of knowing. Recognizing that there are ways of knowing other than science is not a question of one way being more valid than another. Rather, there are many communities of knowing, each having a right to communicate according to knowledge

systems that meet their particular needs; needs that are currently unmet by contemporary library practice.

Chiasmus of librarianship

A shift from homogeneity back to heterogeneity in librarianship can be seen in a larger context of social, cultural and technological change, a process characterized by Marshall McLuhan as chiasmus. Chiasmus is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "A grammatical figure by which the order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in the other." An example from the Bible is Matthew 23:11-12: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." An earthier example is Mae West's quip: "It's not the men in my life, it's the life in my men." In his analysis of change, Marshall McLuhan translated the rhetorical idea of chiasmus into a "law" of reversal: when any human artifact, be it an idea, art, technique, or process, is pushed to its limit, there is a reversal or flip to characteristics of an earlier state. However, chiasmus does not mean a total return to old ways. Rather, it is a metamorphosis of them to fit the new context. As McLuhan observed: a breakdown can lead to a breakthrough. In *The Laws of Media* (1988) and *The Global Village* (1989) McLuhan illustrated how chiasmus could be demonstrated for a whole range of ideas and techniques from acoustic space to the zipper.

To assert that library and information practice is embarking on a process of chiasmus does not mean it is doomed to some kind of deterministic law of change. McLuhan asserted determinism can be avoided if attention is paid to the potential implications of change. Using

McLuhan's application of chiasmus to analyzing change stimulates us to pay attention to and prepare for a profound transformation in twenty-first century practice: a chiasmus of librarianship from the state of universal homogeneity of values and practice characteristic of twentieth century librarianship to a state of particularistic heterogeneity during the twenty-first century.

Interestingly, McLuhan predicted that with the expansion of global electronic communication Westerners, accustomed to the science mode of perceiving the world, would experience a chiasmus to a world view not unlike indigenous peoples. Indeed, McLuhan expected that as society moved further into the era of the home computer and global interactive communication, the mass society library could become obsolete. However, obsolescence does not have to be its fate if practitioners embark on finding new models of practice embracing collaboration with multiple communities of knowing. McLuhan's reference to indigenous peoples is prescient as they serve as an excellent example to illustrate how ways of knowing can differ from the science-based model. Indigenous knowledge systems are the most widely recognized of diverse communities of knowing.

Indigenous knowledge systems as communities of knowing

According to UNESCO the world-wide population of indigenous peoples is about 350 million individuals in over seventy countries representing over 5,000 languages and cultures (UNESCO). Indigenous peoples provide a vivid and readily available example of distinct knowledge systems because they are especially successful in

articulating how their ways of knowing differ from the prevailing science way of knowing. There is an extensive and growing body of literature on all aspects of indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge organization dealing with such issues as intellectual property, cultural heritage preservation, education, language rights, and so forth (a few examples are: Semali and Kincheloe; Battiste and Henderson; Battiste 2000; Battiste 2002; Mihesuah and Cavender ; Riley; Bastien, Mistaken, Kremer; Anderson). Nonetheless, because of their uniqueness and diversity indigenous ways of knowing have been considered existing outside the mainstream science mode of knowing and, therefore, of local interest only to their particular communities.

A brief comparison between contemporary library and information practice and those of indigenous peoples demonstrates how other ways of knowing can possess values and practice dramatically different from those of twentieth century librarianship. Following the linear rationalism of the science model, librarians support the intellectual property rights of the individual creator; see knowledge as a public good that should be universally accessible; are committed to its preservation as fixed, authenticated texts whose accumulation forms a linear narrative embodied in a textual canon. In stark contrast, there is a great diversity among indigenous knowledge systems. Their unique ways of knowing often derive from spiritual cosmologies intimately connected to a longstanding identification with a specific geographic locale. The community may rely on the oral transmission of knowledge through community elders. Because of this mode

of transmission the body of knowledge is flexible, dynamic, organic, and lacking in conical texts. As knowledge is generated out of the community's unique experience with its specific locale, space is privileged over the linear time of scientific rationalism (Shreve 372). While, the body of knowledge can be the possession of the entire community over any individual, all or parts of it can be considered sacred, only accessible to select members of the community. Modes of preservation may be through not only memory and oral transmission but also ceremonies and ritual and a wide variety of artifacts (Birdsall and Shearer).

The characteristics found among diverse indigenous knowledge systems differ substantially from current library and information practice. Consequently indigenous peoples feel compelled to take matters into their own hands (Battiste 2002; Battiste and Henderson; Roy). These efforts include establishing their own library organizations such as the American Indian Library Association and the Torres Strait Islanders Library and Information Network. There are biennial conferences of the International Indigenous Librarians' Forum.

While indigenous peoples serve as a vivid example of a diversity of communities whose knowledge systems can differ substantially form the prevailing science knowledge system there is evidence there are other ways of knowing deserving attention. A recent study undertaken by the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) revealed that multiple ways of knowing can be found among various ethnic, linguistic, disciplinary, and cultural communities. In the CARL

study a panel of Canadian academic researchers identified five scholarly communication research priorities, the first being knowledge systems. The Panel stressed that the creation of knowledge "takes place in complex cultural, linguistic, and regional contexts." In addition to Canadian indigenous knowledge systems, the Panel recognized other sources of knowledge, such as dance, theatre and linguistic and cultural communities can also constitute unique communities of knowing. The Panel concluded there is a need for strategies of knowledge organization that respond to the heterogeneity of the origins and uses of knowledge. Such strategies should be formulated in collaboration with the specific communities of knowing (Birdsall et al.).

Shifting back to a particularistic heterogeneity

There are several examples that can be interpreted as modest evidence of a growing awareness of the challenges of multiple ways of knowing and the need for collaboration to address them. The success of indigenous peoples in gaining recognition of the diversity of their many ways of knowing can itself be seen as evidence of a shift to greater awareness of heterogeneous ways of knowing. Their success is especially noteworthy in its expression in the human rights discourse at the international level (Ivison and Patton,). After twenty years of negotiations the United Nations adopted in September, 2007, a *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (DRIP) by a vote of 143 to 4 (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States opposing). The *Declaration* includes many articles giving communities of

indigenous peoples rights relating to preserving and accessing all forms of their cultural expression and artifacts (United Nations). The DRIP specifically addresses issues critical to modern librarianship including access to information, intellectual property, privacy, modes of preservation, authenticity of knowledge, control of the media, and cultural development (Birdsall 2008). As the DRIP is a declaration only it does not have legal status but it does carry much moral force to support those at the national and international levels working to get the declared rights entrenched in national and international law.

As a result of the efforts of the indigenous peoples movement there is in the library and information field increased efforts to respond to the needs of indigenous peoples. I already noted the issue arose in the CARL study on scholarly communication. International and national professional associations are responding: the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) created a Section on Library Services to Multicultural Populations and adopted a *Multicultural Library Manifesto*; the Canadian Library Association established an Interest Group on Library and Information Needs of Native Peoples and passed an Aboriginal Services Resolution. Schools of library and information studies are beginning to incorporate courses into their curriculum in response to the greater awareness of the needs of indigenous peoples. The University of British Columbia School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies launched a First Nations Curriculum Concentration in its master's programs. Library systems are attempting to establish enhanced service for

indigenous peoples. For example, a Library Services for Saskatchewan Aboriginal Peoples (LSSAP) committee was established in 1991.

Because archivists have always had to be conscious of the contextual sources of cultural records they appear to be moving faster towards a greater sensitivity to multiple ways of knowing and the need for collaboration than other groups within library and information practice. For example, Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinvasan, University of California-Los Angeles Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, examine "Participatory appraisal and arrangement for multicultural archival collections" (Shilton and Srinvasan). They note that archives have traditionally "appropriated the histories of marginalized communities, creating archives *about* rather than *of* communities" (Shilton and Srinvasan 2). As a consequence, "members of marginalized groups have taken preservation into their own hands, building archives and museums devoted to community history" (Shilton and Srinvasan 5). With regard to the processes of arrangement and description of archives they advocate "participatory processes to facilitate the preservation of representative, empowered narratives" (Shilton and Srinvasan 3). They envisage "participatory archiving" practice as a system that should draw upon community knowledge "through methods of participatory design, a movement within the information technology research world that positions users as the designers of their own systems" (Shilton and Srinvasan 8). Examples noted of archivists collaborating with specific communities

include the South East Asian Archives at the University of California (UC) Irvine, the Chicano Studies Archives at UC Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, and the Northern Coast Indian Collection at the Portland Museum of Art.

Further evidence library and information practice may be moving towards greater heterogeneity is the Web 2.0 movement and its derivative Library 2.0 A common theme throughout the discourse surrounding these concepts is the call for an increased participatory role for those for whom systems are being designed. There are references to "an architecture of participation;" "harnessing collective intelligence;" "rich user experience;" "trusting users as co-developers;" development in a state of "perpetual beta"; "the wisdom of crowds" (O'Reilly). Others talk about user-centered participation in the creation of content and services; socially rich communication between users; being communally innovative (Maness). Principles enunciated for Library 2.0 include "freeing of data," "participative," "work for the user," "sharing," "communication and facilitating community," "trust" (Miller, 2005; Miller, 2006). Library 2.0 values are significant because of the great extent to which they include: user participation in research and development; a non-hierarchical relationship through collaboration among users, developers, and service providers; a commitment to community building and to the needs of distinct communities; and a recognition that technological developments are always in a state of "beta development" (Birdsall 2007)

The above examples are examples of a growing awareness of the need for greater collaboration with diverse communities of knowing. But they do not as yet represent a fundamental challenge to the current institutional and professional structures of twentieth century librarianship.

Going for the breakthrough: collaboration with communities of knowing

The universalizing mode of knowledge organization has reached its limit of effectiveness as a model for librarianship in a global environment of multiple ways of knowing. The traditional gatekeeper role to information cherished by librarians during the twentieth century will become obsolete. The time is ripe for chiasmus. Remembering McLuhan's admonition, this chiasmus should not be seen as a breakdown but as an opportunity for a breakthrough to a fundamental transformation of library and information practice based on collaborative evidence based practice with multiple communities of knowing to meet their specific knowledge needs.

This collaboration will be a profound change in the power relationship between professional and client. For example, despite the creation of the LSSAP initiative in Saskatchewan, it failed to attract as much participation of Aboriginal Peoples communities as was hoped for. Consequently, a key recommendation of a Minister's Advisory Committee on Library Services for Aboriginal Peoples, created in 2001, is that:

First Nations retain responsibility for developing and funding local, on-

reserve library services, in cooperation with the regional libraries and the federal government. It is their responsibility to determine the kind and level of public library services they wish to establish on reserves, such as, stand alone public libraries, school-housed public libraries, book mobiles, book drops, computer, or van delivery (Sinclair-Sparvier).

Edgardo Civallero, National University of Cordoba, Argentina, also stresses the necessity to address the needs of the diversity of indigenous people's communities through a collaborative strategy that acknowledges each community knows best its problems and what it wants for the future. He states "…it is both necessary and urgent to hear the voices of the final users, those with whom we want to collaborate." Consequently, "Any collaboration program should start just by listening [to] them, understanding them and working with them (*grass-root development*)" (Civallero 4). In this context he warns that librarians should not see themselves as "heroes or saviours, but as helping hands..."

A heterogeneous model of librarianship will require building a new professional knowledge base through collaborative, participatory research with different communities of knowing. As Civallero observes:

> It is not a matter of simply adapting a widely known and already used model to special circumstances: strange transplants are meant to fail and to be refused by any organic system. It is about creating a new, unique, imaginative model, likely to be continuously

adapted to the expected development of any human group by using *action-research*" (his emphasis) (Civallero 5).

Cora Weber-Pillwax, a Canadian authority on indigenous research methodologies, also advocates action-research and the need for research objectives and methodology to contribute to the real community needs (Weber-Pillwax). Indeed, a key element of participatory action research is the shift in power from the current one of power being held solely by the researcher/practitioner to being a model where power is held by the diverse communities of knowing, a situation that raises professional and political challenges to traditional models of research (Cornwall and Jewkes; Grenier).

Recognizing there are multiple communities of knowing requires the collaborative research of the fundamentals of contemporary library practice, addressing such questions as: What is the appropriate professional/client relationship? What constitutes authentic knowledge? Who "owns" it? How can knowledge be most effectively distributed and in what forms? How should access be provided and to whom? What are the appropriate modes of preservation and the appropriate institutions to do so? What happens when knowledge is translated from one medium to another? Who is responsible for developing the methodologies of a specific community's knowledge needs and system?

Conclusion

The evidence based library and information practice movement is taking the lead in attempting to link research and practice. However, in my view, if it is to make a substantive contribution to a twenty-first century shift to heterogeneous practice it must incorporate into its research ethos collaboration with specific communities of knowing. The transformation to a model of serving communities of knowing is a fundamental challenge to the ethos, institutional and legal structures, and methodology of library and information practice. This will not be an easy objective to achieve as resistance could arise from a number of fronts. The scientific ethos is strongly entrenched throughout library and information practice, training, research, values, and institutions. Also, the institutional structure of library and information practice is what could be called jurisdictional, that is, libraries are funded by and serve specific legal jurisdictions: municipalities, counties, states; higher educational institutions; elementary and secondary schools; corporate bodies. They are not orientated to serve specific communities of knowing. The shift to serving communities of knowing both within and outside traditional jurisdictions raises many legal, political, and financial issues. There is also the cult of efficiency within librarianship to overcome. Any major change involves experimentation, risk, failure and is time. Shilton and Srinivasan warn that participative methodologies can be "particularly labor-intensive" (Shilton and Srinivasan 12).

While there may be resistance to moving to a particularistic

heterogeneous model, the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples could be interpreted as a harbinger of other communities of knowing demanding a role in the development of their own knowledge systems, a harbinger to which library and information practitioners should direct their attention and energy. As Canadian lawyer and library trustee Merillee Rasmussen reminds us that in the current environment of global electronic communication it is possible for individuals "to belong to a community in an era when the nature of community is changing" (Rasmussen 142). Thus, we could see, in addition to the demands of traditional communities of knowing, new communities calling for collaborative initiatives for developing their unique knowledge systems.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century were a period of tremendous creativity for the emerging profession of librarianship, including the *annus mirabilis* of 1876. Perhaps the closing decades of the twenty-first century will witness another burst of comparable creativity, thereby completing the chiasmus of a evidence based, collaborative librarianship.

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