Throughout the hundred years history of education for librarianship some issues have been discussed again and again without agreement being reached. A number of these are quite central to the problem of education for a profession: the desirability (or otherwise) of professional schools; the control of education by professional bodies; theory vs. practice; fieldwork; the ‘core’ curriculum.

“If the past were ever past there would be little use in recalling it, but it lives with us in never-ending variations.”

Freya Stark

1. Introduction

As education for librarianship approaches its centenary it is curious to note how many of the issues debated over the course of the last hundred years still remain unresolved today. Some of these are quite fundamental to the whole matter of education for a profession.

In its strictly defined sense of formal full-time instruction, in an institution of higher education, specifically in librarianship, our professional education owes its origin to Melvil Dewey whose ideas of a ‘librarians’ college’, first publicly expounded in 1879, were realized in the School of Library Economy at Columbia College, New York (later Columbia University), which opened its doors on 5th January 1887 with an enrolment of twenty students and Dewey himself as Professor of Library Economy.

Ten years earlier Dewey had been present at the Conference of Librarians in London where he heard two librarians from Oxford, Charles H. Robarts of All Souls’ College, supported by Henry O. Coxe, Bodley’s Librarian, put forward a radical and complex scheme for uniting their two institutions to provide for, among other objectives, a ‘School of Librarians’. Nothing was to come of this proposal, and education for librarianship in Britain and in the United States were to follow distinctly different paths. However, many of the issues contended over have been markedly similar on both sides of the Atlantic, perhaps because rooted in the nature of professional education itself and in the shared Anglo-American tradition of librarianship rather than in specific national differences.
The first step in Britain was taken by the fledgling Library Association of the United Kingdom (as it was then known), founded at that same 1877 Conference of Librarians. In 1880 it set up a committee to “consider how library assistants may best be aided in their training”. The committee’s view was that this could best be served by providing for the examination of candidates and the granting of certificates of proficiency. A syllabus was drawn up, and in July 1885 three candidates presented themselves for examination, two of whom were awarded certificates.

Similar stirrings were evident on the continent of Europe at the time, with the foundation in 1886 of a professorship in librarianship at the University of Göttingen and an 1886 law providing for library schools at the two National Central Libraries at Rome and Florence. In the event, however, neither of these initiatives resulted in a library school, though Karl Dziatzko, the first occupant of the German chair, did for some years deliver a series of public lectures and conduct a weekly bibliographical seminar. The Italian law was never implemented; indeed in 1889 it was abrogated.

In 1879 France had anticipated Britain with an examination and certification system, but, characteristically, established by government decree. Preparation for this examination, as for the Library Association examination in Britain, was by the apprentice method, or ‘learning by doing’. This of course had been the traditional method used by all the professions, medicine and law not excepted. It was to remain the normal method in librarianship for decades, indeed in some countries for generations. Even in the United States apprentice training in libraries continued alongside the library schools for many years. Thirty years after Dewey’s venture these traditional training agencies were still turning out two to three times as many librarians as the library schools.

2. Library school or not?

In his address to the Library Association Conference at Cambridge in September 1882, Henry R. Tedder, the prime mover behind the LA examination system, quoted with approval the remarks of Robarts and Coxe of five years earlier about a School of Librarians at Oxford, but then went on to assert: “It is impossible to train librarians except in connection with a large library. No amount of professional lecturing or intimate acquaintance with mere book-lore is, without practical experience, of much value in preparing for the administration of a library. Every large library is a training school in an informal manner” [1].

Almost exactly one hundred years later in October 1982 we find Keith Harris, like Tedder a Fellow of the Library Association, maintaining that library schools are unable to produce the kind of librarian needed for academic libraries because lecturers “are often to some extent sheltered from reality . . . we must relegate library science to in-service training in a small number of good libraries and this means the development of teaching libraries” [2].
Unless such a view is quite unrepresentative this would suggest that the most fundamental question of all about library education has still not been satisfactorily settled. Despite the fact that library schools have been established in almost a hundred countries since Dewey, are they really needed?

The *raison d’être* of any professional school is that would-be practitioners can be more effectively and economically educated in the classroom than on the job. The claim that librarians need such a professional school has been disputed from the moment Dewey informed the 1883 conference of the American Library Association at Buffalo of “an experiment we hope to try at Columbia”. William F. Poole argued that “practical work in a library... was the only proper way to train good librarians. The information cannot be imparted by lectures; and who, that is competent, has the time to do the lecturing?... There is no training school for educating librarians like a well-managed library” [3]. Of course others thought differently, and this 1883 debate “symbolized the diversity of opinion on professional training that has persisted to the present” [4].

Dewey’s pioneering experiment was observed with great interest from Britain and in 1893 James Duff Brown, one of the LA’s first examiners, visited Dewey’s school in the course of a tour of libraries in the United States. He was not impressed by anything he saw, reporting on his return: “American librarians have learned nothing from their superior experience which is of general application. I make a present to the United States of the ‘Library School’ idea with all my heart. May its operations not in the course of time flood the universal globe and librarianship with a ‘monstrous regiment of women’ which neither trumpet blasts nor acts of legislature will ever keep in check” [5]! This gratuitous aside, an allusion to his fellow-Scot’s diatribe against an English queen, was perhaps provoked by his discovery that the Columbia School’s first intake of twenty students included seventeen women, but it serves to remind us that it was Dewey’s insistence on admitting women contrary to the College Statutes that largely accounted for his virtual dismissal by the Trustees and his subsequent transfer of the School to Albany, which is where Brown visited him.

The fact that Dewey had openly proclaimed: “We greatly prefer college-bred women in selecting new librarians” [6] draws our attention to yet another issue in library education still unresolved a hundred years later, though today the boot is on the other foot, with a preponderance of women in the profession. Ralph W. Conant recently found that an attempt to redress the balance in American schools by positive discrimination in favour of men is unacceptable: a common criticism is that “Schools are sexist in admission; a double standard admits men who are marginally qualified but rejects women with equal qualifications” [7].

As well as the outright opponents of library schools, there has always been a body of opinion in favour of formal education for librarians, though maintaining that any library school must be part of a library. It is of course a fact that of the fifteen US schools founded before 1920 several were set up in libraries rather than in academic institutions, and Dewey’s own school, as we have seen, was transferred from its
academic home at Columbia to the New York State Library at Albany (though it was
to return to Columbia University in 1926).

It is also true that the case for library schools in libraries has a longer history,
deriving from Martin W. Schrettinger, who in 1814 was the very first to propose,
“in clear and unequivocal terms, the idea of and the need for formal schooling for
librarians” [8]. He wished to see such schools established in large public libraries.
But for the US the turning point came in 1923 with the highly influential report
on library education by Charles C. Williamson. He acknowledged that all libraries,
and particularly large ones, have a training role, but he recognised that this is very
different from professional education, and that “The attempt to combine the two is
fatal to both.” He wrote: “One of the most important conclusions of this study is that
the professional library school should be organized as a department of a university,
along with the other professional schools, rather than in public libraries, state or
municipal.” [9].

In a special issue of Library quarterly, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of
Dewey’s Columbia School, John D. Cowley, describing library education in Europe,
was obliged to admit in 1937 that “It is obvious at once that there is no general
agreement” on the simple proposition that “instruction should be given in schools
established for the purpose and not in libraries themselves” [10]. But in the US
at least the profession took heed of Williamson and university schools are now the
established pattern in North America. In Britain too all schools are now located in
universities or similar academic institutions.

Though exceptions can be found, e.g., in the Austrian National Library and in
the Vatican Library, the rest of the world has largely followed this example. The
Standards for library schools, 1976, compiled by the International Federation of
Library Associations and Institutions state plainly: “The School should be part of an
institute which awards a university degree or equivalent credential; or it should be
an independent institution itself giving instruction at university level and awarding a
credential equivalent to a university degree” [11].

More recently the UNESCO Guidelines for curriculum development in information
studies, compiled “with particular emphasis on the needs of developing countries”,
have confirmed that “It is widely believed that for the higher levels of study for
library and information work – certainly those at post-graduate and undergraduate
level – the university provides the most appropriate environment” [12]. But that
is not to say that every country must have a library school. Referring particularly
to developing countries Guy A. Marco has explained: “Schools are inevitable in a
critically complex occupation as the most efficient way to transmit the tricks, and
concepts, of the work to beginners. As a corollary, schools are not inevitable (without
necessity) in an occupation which has not yet reached a point of critical complexity
. . . They may exist; and this is demonstrated by the fact that quite a few do exist in
such situations. But lacking necessity, they appear destined to falter . . . Perhaps a
modified apprentice system is more suitable for such countries” [13].
But even in the developed world, as we have seen, there are those who still argue for learning on the job. There are several examples in Britain and the United States of large academic libraries headed by people who have not attended library school, including some who are not even professionally qualified. But even those who are professional librarians can still be found regretting the existence of library schools: for example, Raymond Moss, the head of a large English academic library, believes that “Education and training for library work should take place in libraries not classrooms . . . This would provide a more satisfactory and economical solution than the present arrangement of library schools, divorced from libraries and owing their existence more to empire-building than to educational need” [14]. Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, Michael Gorman, a British expatriate, recently seems to have concluded that the “experiment at Columbia” was a mistake and offers “a realistic and consistent new agenda” for the future: “The focus of library education in this country since the time of Melvil Dewey has been the library school . . . The gap between teaching and practice, between abstraction and practicality, is probably larger in librarianship than in any other profession . . . The library school and the library would be merged organizationally in this scheme. Librarians would have the option of teaching in the areas of their competence. Students could participate at all levels in all aspects of running the library. One part of the library could be set aside for students to run” [15].

3. Control by the profession

In many professions, perhaps in most, a degree of tension between teachers and practitioners is normal, and the library profession is no exception. Varying over the years from open hostility to uneasy truce, this tension has its origin in the fact that historically the professions have regarded the selection and admission of new members as one of their most central roles. When librarians, like other emerging occupations in the nineteenth century, sought to organise themselves into professional bodies, it was inevitable that much of their effort would be concentrated on the recruitment, training and certification of would-be practitioners. In Britain, indeed, such bodies have been given the name ‘qualifying associations’.

However, the interest and concern for education shown from their earliest days by the American Library Association and the Library Association of the United Kingdom can by no means be identified with support for library schools. The first President of the ALA, Justin Winsor, without doubt the best known librarian of his time, made no secret of his view that practical experience is the best preparation for librarianship. According to Sarah K. Vann, “no subject proposed before 1883 had created a more controversial and divisive atmosphere within the Association than had the plan for a School of Library Economy” [16]. Though the ALA moved swiftly in August 1883 to set up a Committee on the Proposed School of Library Economy the initiative was soon lost to the library schools. Jesse H. Shera’s verdict on these early
days is that the ALA “contained within its membership too diverse a group of interests and factions to permit it to exercise any real leadership in library education”. Though this was, in his view, “a malady from which the Association also suffers today” [17], the successors of the 1883 Committee, under various names and in various forms, have in fact enabled the Association to establish a modus vivendi with the schools. Recognising early on that it was the schools that were to become, in Conant’s words, the “natural gatekeepers of the profession” [7], the ALA concentrated on controlling the schools. Starting in 1900 with a highly critical report on the four existing schools, it formulated a set of standards in 1906, progressed to the formal accreditation of schools in 1925 and the series of revised standards (1925, 1933, 1951) culminating in the current 1972 Standards [18].

In the hands of the Committee on Accreditation (C.O.A.) this is a powerful weapon. As James S. Healey has recently explained, “The library profession has established the C.O.A. to be its educational watchdog. The profession has given the power of life and death to the C.O.A., and instructed it to exercise that power to insure that the professionals being trained will meet at least minimal qualifications” [19]. Naturally, this relationship is not always harmonious, but it has survived over two generations. Less comfortably, perhaps, according to the Association of American Library Schools, “The role of accreditation is still imperfectly understood by faculty members and the general world of librarianship” [20]. And currently it is still a matter of controversy.

Starting from a similar position (though three years earlier) with its 1880 Committee, the Library Association of the United Kingdom soon took a distinctly divergent line from the ALA, though, interestingly enough, a hundred years later these paths are beginning to converge again. In late-nineteenth-century Britain, there was a very different educational climate: not only were the professions generally in the hands of the “qualifying associations”, but the university was not regarded as “a place of professional education”, to quote the words of John Stuart Mill when Rector of St. Andrews. “Universities”, he explained, “are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining a livelihood . . . What professional men should carry away with them from a university, is not professional knowledge, but that which should direct their use of professional knowledge, and bring the light of general culture to illuminate the technicalities of a special pursuit” [21].

The establishment of its examination system, confirmed by grant of a Royal Charter in 1898, and the consequent introduction of a professional register in 1909 gave the Library Association complete control of the profession in Britain: those wishing to qualify as librarians had to join the LA, pass its examinations, and pay annual dues to remain on its register. A perhaps inevitable consequence of this monopoly was a deep suspicion of any possible rival, even if that rival were a university wishing to set up a library school. No doubt rightly, the LA feared that any such university would insist on drawing up its own curriculum, setting its own examinations, and awarding its own degrees or diplomas.
The LA first turned its mind to the provision of ‘some means of instruction’ at its 1892 Annual Conference in Paris, and in the following year there began a series of successful summer schools, held first in London, then later in Manchester, Aberystwyth, and other centres. In 1898 the LA organised part-time classes in London that were to be repeated each winter, and in 1904 became the first professional body in Britain to provide correspondence courses.

But the possibility of a British library school was in the wind. Addressing the LA in 1902, Sidney Webb, founder of the London School of Economics, advised: “I do not think that professional or any other kind of education should be managed by a professional association... education should be conducted by educational bodies, in definitely organized institutions, side by side with other students, and in close conjunction with other branches of study” [22]. According to the LA’s own historian, Webb was “much more far-seeing than most librarians of the period” [23], and the inauguration of part-time classes at LSE in October 1902 owed much to his interest. Though the School, perhaps surprisingly, permitted the LA to control the examinations, issue the certificates to the successful candidates, and even nominate the lecturers, the LA became increasingly suspicious of granting a foothold in library education to an independent academic institution, however prestigious. For its part, LSE was perturbed by the elementary level of some of the courses it was expected to teach, enrolments dwindled, and the outbreak of war in 1914 provided a convenient excuse for the suspension of classes at what some have described as “the first British School of Librarianship” [23].

But powerful voices were soon raised urging the establishment of a permanent library school. In 1917, prompted by a suggestion from Sir William Osler, Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, submitted to the Royal Commission on University Education in Wales a “Draft scheme for a School of Training for Library work, leading to the degree of B.A., and a Diploma in Librarianship” [24]. More significantly, the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust began to take an interest, and with the promise of its financial support the LA and University College, London, began the negotiations which were to bear fruit in the foundation in 1919 of the University of London School of Librarianship.

In the words of a later Director of the School, “No sorrier story could be told than that of the unseemly wrangle which followed” [10]. There was first of all uproar, culminating in the resignation of the President, in the LA itself over the man chosen to head the School, Ernest A. Baker. Yet he was a Fellow of the Library Association, an elected member of its Council, Secretary of its Education Committee since 1905, and the best known proponent of the library school idea in Britain. He was, as his Times obituary was to say, the ‘obvious choice’ for the job, so much so indeed that one suspects that the LA was piqued less by the man selected than by the way the University College had appointed him, without first seeking the approval of the Association.

Then there was an intense campaign waged against the School by the Library Assistants’ Association, realising too late that the LA’s education monopoly had
Shocked and fearful that the School's diplomates would compete for the better jobs with holders of the LA certificates. Cowley, who succeeded Baker, was to report that "Ridiculous and malicious statements were made about the standard of the School’s examinations, and the success of educated young men and women in them was declared to be due merely to the ease of acquiring the University diploma" [10]. An interesting parallel can be drawn with the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago, founded in 1926, also with Carnegie funding, to develop the first advanced programme in library education. According to Shera, writing nearly fifty years later, it proved to be "the greatest single force of its generation in American librarianship and American library education" [17]. Yet its early years too were clouded by the instant and bitter antagonism of the profession.

Though relations between the London School and the LA were eventually to ease, particularly after Cowley’s appointment in 1934, the long-term effect of the early wrangling was to prevent the establishment of further schools in Britain for a generation (though the new Irish Free State set up its own School at University College, Dublin, in 1928). Furthermore, when World War II gave the profession a chance radically to rethink its attitude towards library education, and the profession accepted as official post-war policy Lionel R. McColvin’s recommendations that new library schools should be set up in universities, the LA virtually ensured that negotiations with the University Grants Committee and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors would come to naught by insisting that students must follow the LA syllabus and take the LA examinations. Conversely, when University College, Nottingham, proposed the establishment of a diploma course in librarianship, it was the College’s insistence on setting its own examinations that ensured the opposition of the LA.

So the five (later seven) new full-time library schools that were established with the blessing of the LA in 1946 were very different institutions from the typical US library school. They were located in non-university commercial and technical colleges, under the control of elected local politicians. And not only were the teachers allowed no say over the syllabus, they were also specifically excluded by the LA from any part in the setting or marking of the examinations used to assess their students.

But even this measured step, long overdue though it was, did not have the support of some senior figures in the profession. The LA President himself, R.J. Gordon, used his Presidential Address to “wonder if we have moved in the right direction?... Can the librarian of the future develop the critical judgement necessary for the task if his training consists of instruction only?... I believe the really vital aspects of librarianship cannot be taught” [25]. Ten years later this professional view of library schools had hardly changed. Gerald Bramley, the historian of British library education, has written: “The apprentice method was still regarded by many senior librarians as the most appropriate method of becoming a qualified librarian. The schools of librarianship had come into being as a temporary expedient. Against the expectations of many members of the library profession they had survived” [26]. The great majority of young would-be librarians seemed to agree with their seniors: perhaps three-quarters still studied for their examinations while in full-time jobs.
But the library schools had no intention of withering away; indeed as the new corps of full-time library school teachers gained in experience and confidence they began to stir under the LA yoke. The externally imposed syllabus and externally set and marked examinations, over which they still had no influence, effectively ruled out any initiative or innovation in teaching. The actual examination questions, rooted in practical techniques, were in many cases identical with those set twenty years earlier. But suggestions from the schools that they could perhaps be allowed to examine their own students aroused the gravest misgivings within the profession at large and were turned down flat by the LA.

An even more pointed rebuff was offered in 1954. When the Association of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux, increasingly dissatisfied with the public library bias of the LA examinations, threatened to set up a rival system, a Joint LA-ASLIB Committee was established to devise a new syllabus, but the library schools were deliberately excluded. However, when the draft syllabus proved unacceptable to the LA membership a new Syllabus Subcommittee was set up in 1957, this time with the library schools represented. This was to prove a turning point. At first the schools’ radical proposals, though accepted by the Subcommittee, met with immediate opposition from the profession. The Subcommittee beat a hasty retreat and produced a compromise based on the status quo, but eventually wiser counsels prevailed and the Subcommittee concluded that their original proposals had been along the right lines, a decision which the profession eventually accepted.

The resulting new syllabus, introduced in 1964, marked the coming-of-age of the library schools. Full-time library education henceforward became the norm in Britain, with a two-year course for non-graduates and a one-year course for graduates. This in effect marked the end of the old apprenticeship system, though old attitudes towards education still lingered. For example, when some library schools moved to follow the established practice of other professions, such as teaching and medicine, and began to recruit students direct from schools and universities rather than from those already employed in libraries, the profession once again voiced its concern. Practical library experience before library school was widely regarded as essential. Today opinion is still divided on the matter, not just within the profession but among the library schools themselves, with some of them insisting that all entrants must have worked in a library. In recent years something like two-thirds of the library schools’ intake have previous library experience.

For the last twenty years the tide has run very much the library schools’ way. The LA soon recognised the intimate connection between teaching and examining, and from 1966 allowed schools to examine their own students subject to certain safeguards, one of which was that the examinations should be based on the existing LA syllabus. In the event this proved less significant than it might have been, for by 1968 there were six university schools instead of one only five years earlier, with the academic autonomy that implies; and the advent of the Council for National Academic Awards allowed the non-university schools also to offer undergraduate degrees and postgraduate diplomas in librarianship. The numbers of candidates
wishing to enter for LA examinations dwindled rapidly, so much so that from 1971 school after school was obliged to abandon the two-year course in favour of a three-year degree course. The LA was at first reluctant to acknowledge this trend. It strongly opposed the establishment of at least two of the university schools, and it rejected the first CNAA degree syllabus submitted by a non-university school for its approval. In 1971 it made a number of changes in its own syllabus, including a wider range of optional papers.

But the library schools were genuinely anxious to obtain the approval of the LA for their degrees and diplomas, not least so that their graduates and diplomates could be exempted from the LA’s own examinations in order to register as chartered librarians after the appropriate period of supervised library service. In due course and in the face of some mistrust of the motives of the library schools among the membership the LA bowed to the inevitable and approved each of the new degrees and diplomas in turn.

By 1978 the LA was advising prospective entrants to the profession that its professional examinations would be withdrawn in 1980. In the event this date was extended to help transitional candidates but all would-be librarians are now obliged to complete an approved course of study at a library school. The LA has already embarked upon a revision of its system of course approval, and at a seminar ‘Working in harmony’ held jointly with the schools in May 1982 some remaining differences were aired and some progress made.

Time was when the American Library Association used to regard with some envy the total control exercised over professional certification by the Library Association. Now it is the turn of the LA to study with interest the ALA model of professional accreditation in its own search for a modus vivendi with the library schools that would adequately reflect the shift in power. It seems likely that approval of a school’s courses will be based on quinquennial visits by the LA Board of Assessors.

4. Theory versus practice

Underlying much of the unease between the profession and the library schools over the last hundred years has been the potential conflict between theory and practice. W. Boyd Rayward tells us that “From the beginning the concern of ALA was with the need for practical training in actual libraries” [27]. A similar anxiety that library school courses should relate to professional practice has always been at the heart of the Library Association’s thinking from the moment the London School was founded and is stronger than ever today. One of the most frequently repeated charges in the 1920s was that compared with the LA certificates, the London University diploma represented “the ton of theory without the ounce of practice” [28]. Fifty years after Dewey’s School opened, the Director of the London School reported: “If we examine the systems actually in operation in different countries, we shall find almost everywhere an underlying divergence of opinion as to the value of practical and
theoretical training, respectively... Those whom we may term the “theoreticalists” insist always on an advanced standard of education, either general or special, and place the emphasis of the professional training on the more theoretical subjects... On the other hand, the “practicalists” claim that librarianship can be learned only by actual experience and that such theoretical instruction as is given is only supplementary to and an explanation of what the student is learning by actual accomplishment.” His cautious prediction that “it may take a generation to reach a solution” [10] has proved to be over-optimistic.

Writing in 1949 for an international audience in the first of the widely influential UNESCO Public Library Manuals J. Periam Danton was able to identify specific national differences: “In many schools in Europe, notably those of Belgium, Great Britain, Norway and Switzerland, and in Latin American countries and the United States instructional emphasis is still on the specific, the technical and practical, to the virtual exclusion of the theoretical and general.” Schools in Czechoslovakia, France, Italy and increasingly, the United States, he characterised as among “those who would place greater emphasis on the theoretical approach”. But he was obliged to report that “This conflict has not been resolved even by the schools with the longest and most successful history” [29].

In the years following World War II, as might be expected, the opportunity was taken to make major revisions in the curriculum. In the United States the move by virtually all the accredited schools towards the master’s degree as the first professional qualification was the most obvious sign of a distinct shift from stress on the practical and technical aspects of librarianship to a more academic and theoretical approach that attempted to generalize on the basis of the traditional techniques. Some years later in 1954 Robert D. Leigh attempted to assess these changes. He found that “The former criticism of too much emphasis on memory techniques has been replaced by the criticism that there is too little training in techniques, so that the present grave problem is whether library schools in their trend towards graduate, professional, academic standards have thrown out the baby with the bath and are too divorced from the day to day work in libraries.” Of the five major educational problems still unresolved he chose to put first this striking of a balance between theory and practice. He insisted that it had to be “faced and resolved within the next few years” [30].

Perhaps inevitably, this hope too was to be disappointed: a generation later the topic is still debated as vigorously as ever with little sign of an agreed solution. Of course, as Danton said, “The question is largely one of emphasis, with compromise between the two points of view a necessary modus operandi in any school” [29]. In the fifteen schools that Conant investigated he found that “three of the schools emphasized theory and principles largely to the exclusion of practical instruction. Three others emphasized practical instruction with a minimum of theoretical context. Nine of the fifteen schools attempted to strike a balance between theory and practice” [7].

In Britain, with the curriculum so firmly under the control of the Library Association for so long, it was to be expected that the tone would be severely practical, even ludicrously so at times, as critics were not slow to point out. But the gradual
eclipse during the 1960s and 1970s of the LA examinations by undergraduate degrees and postgraduate diplomas awarded by universities and the CNAA inevitably brought a shift towards theory. The CNAA, indeed, made clear from the outset that it would only be willing to consider degrees in professional studies if they dealt with underlying theory and fundamental principles.

Predictably, just as in the American schools a few years earlier, as the pendulum swung towards theory the critics who had deplored the over-emphasis on the practical were replaced by critics who maintained that theory was now being stressed at the expense of practice. At an ASLIB forum on the issue in 1971 the library schools rounded on their detractors with such spirit that Douglas Foskett expressed himself “appalled at the reactions”. Nevertheless, he did concede that “The relation between theory and practice is one of the most difficult problems confronting all those who are concerned with preparing and conducting initial courses in a professional activity” [31].

Unquestionably, the problem is one that plagues many professions. Most thoughtful observers are agreed that practice and theory are both necessary, but in librarianship at least scarcely any have ventured to explain how this is to be achieved in a professional education programme. One who has attempted this task recently is Conant, perhaps significantly a non-librarian: “An appropriate instructional program stresses the concepts upon which practice is based. The specifics of practice are used as examples of the concept so that the student gains a level of understanding of practice that allows him or her varieties of application that are derived from a few concepts . . . Conceptual instruction that fails to incorporate examples from practice risks producing graduates who are not fully competent to apply their conceptual knowledge to practice” [7].

That this is not easy can be gauged from such student opinion as has been sought on the issue. A 1976 survey of 194 students of the Graduate Library School, Indiana University, found a considerable degree of uncertainty in their minds: “When asked . . . if library schools should prepare students for the immediate tasks of their first professional assignment, 28 per cent agreed, 32 per cent disagreed, and 40 per cent were uncertain.” The study hopefully concluded that “The relationship between theory and practice need not be one of mutual antagonism”, but went on to recognise that “emphasis on both may be confusing to the students” [32]. In 1976 the Association of Assistant Librarians surveyed by questionnaire final year students in 14 British library schools. Response was very low, with “just over 20%” of the 1000 questionnaires being completed, but for what it is worth the proposition that “a librarianship course should emphasise a demanding academic education” rather than “training in the techniques and practice of the profession” [33] was opposed by a large majority of students (67.5% on the last three points at the no end of a seven-point scale).

An illuminating glimpse of how the debate can ebb and flow even within the mind of a single individual has been vouchsafed us by Roy Stokes, who has headed library schools on both sides of the Atlantic. Prefacing an excellent discussion of the problem he confessed: “In my very earliest years in library education and, if I
remember rightly, the first time I spoke publicly on any issue connected with library education, I stated my belief that librarianship could, if necessary, be taught in a tent in the middle of a desert. That was a particularly hopeful viewpoint and, as I now see it, an unbelievably naive opinion. As time has gone by I have come to revise that view quite radically. I now believe that one of the most serious problems facing library education is the manner in which it can effect a balance between practice and theory” [34].

5. Fieldwork

One response of the library schools to this potentially damaging dichotomy between theory and practice has been the integration of one or more periods of work in a library into the student’s course of formal study. Described variously as practice work, practical work, field experience, fieldwork, practicum, work experience, internship, work-study, practical placement, it is an issue as controversial today as it ever was, at least in the British and American literature. R.J. Prytherch has well characterised a century of discussion: “Historically, in librarianship education, trends of opinion on fieldwork have moved to one side or another without a satisfactory conclusion being reached; in Great Britain some have argued for pure education followed by a period of induction, where the official Library Association line has long been in support of fieldwork – a 1977 report having been preceded by a 1971, and in 1942 by McColvin who wanted a 50 per cent content of practical experience on the type of course then current. In North America the historical pattern has shown similar reversals of policy: the earliest schools relied on apprentice-style training with high fieldwork provision. This was vigorously condemned in 1923 and for the following half-century attitudes to fieldwork grew from this reversal. In the 1950s and 1960s pure education became desirable, and fieldwork faded; a ‘renaissance’ is now perceived” [35].

The very variation of terminology itself has been a matter of complaint for at “least” half a century. Williamson in 1923 noted that “the terminology is not settled, some schools . . . using the terms ‘practice’, ‘field practice’, and ‘practical work’ interchangeably” [9]. In 1933 Ernest J. Reece sadly concluded “the confusion of terminology among library schools . . . renders intelligent discussion impossible” [36].

Dewey himself set the pace at Columbia, stating in a prospectus issued in 1884 that “Lectures and reading alone will not achieve the best results in training for librarianship without the . . . study of various libraries in successful operation, and actual work in a library” [37]. Formal classwork was restricted to three months in the School’s first year of operation (extended to four months by request of the students) and seven months in the second. The reminder of the time was spent gaining actual library experience.

Fieldwork is an issue on which students have made their views known from the outset: a member of that first class later wrote “the apprenticeship term was of great
value in confirming our uncertain impression of what we had been taught” [38]. But student opinion too, like that of their seniors, has veered from one side to the other. Williamson’s denunciation of fieldwork in 1923 was to a considerable extent based on his findings that to the students it was of very little value [9].

To be fair to the students, however, their complaints have usually been directed not so much at fieldwork per se but at the way it has been arranged, as Reece pointed out in 1936: “fieldwork often has seemed faultily planned and carelessly directed, and . . . sometimes it has resulted in casual treatment and waste of time, and even exploitation and neglect”. He did find, however, that “its unquestioned value has assured its persistence, although with modified emphasis” [39].

By the time master’s degrees had become the norm in the late 1950s and 1960s fieldwork had fallen out of fashion. A 1969 survey found that 17 out of the 45 accredited schools in the US and Canada had never included fieldwork as part of the curriculum and a further 11 schools had dropped it [40]. By 1975 the practicum was required in only 4 out of the 62 ALA-accredited library schools though in 20 it was available for all students who wanted it. Significantly, students were now reported to look with favour on fieldwork [41].

But opinions in the US were changing. Barbara A. Ward was driven to exclaim: How any school engaged in creating a quality program of library education can eliminate, limit to one student segment, or fail to include a field experience component in the program of study, for whatever reason, is incomprehensible. . . . Without field experience, the total system is unfinished and incomplete. Students cannot function effectively without it [42]. Margaret E. Monroe has recently reported that “the 1980’s are seeing an upsurge of attention to this topic” [43].

Conant found in his interviews with ex-students that a substantial majority felt the need for some fieldwork on their courses. Those few who had experienced it had found it valuable. Reporting in 1980 he made one of his major recommendations that master’s programmes should include “a substantial internship or practicum” [7].

Without full-time education the concept of fieldwork is of course meaningless, and could not become an issue in Britain until 1919. Though criticised for its alleged detachment from library practice the London School did not move to introduce what it called ‘practical work’ until 1935.

Though the official policy of the Library Association was that practical work should be an essential element of library school courses the new full-time schools that opened in 1946 had far too many other problems to concern themselves with fieldwork, but by 1951 at least one school was placing its students in libraries for two short periods during the Christmas and Easter vacations.

The 1964 syllabus made full-time education the norm, thus increasing the desirability of fieldwork, and about half the schools then introduced it, some making it compulsory. In 1968 they received the official blessing of the Library Advisory Councils, established to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Science, which reported: “In our view practical work in libraries should be planned as an
integral part of all full-time courses” [44]. Two of the largest schools appointed Liaison and Training Officers with specific responsibility for fieldwork.

Quick to see the benefits of fieldwork, students were concerned that several schools seemed to have set their faces against it, and in 1969 produced a report giving strong support to the idea [45]. Six years later they were disappointed to find that many of the 15 British library schools “offer no fieldwork at all, but plenty of excuses for not doing so . . . this dichotomy in education for librarianship stands out like a sore thumb” [46].

Despite the fact that the LA has re-asserted its policy in favour of “The inclusion of fieldwork as an integral and compulsory element of education in librarianship” [47], several British schools still do not include it in their curricula. Some would argue that their insistence on prior library experience before a student is admitted ensures sufficient contact with library practice. Against this is Conant’s opinion that “Previous experience in a library, even at a professional level, cannot be considered an adequate substitute for the study of principle and theory in juxtaposition to a practical experience in which the principles and theory are applied” [7].

A more convincing excuse for avoiding fieldwork is Prytherch’s point that “the educational purpose is far from agreed, and . . . the overall aims are so amorphous that systematic evaluation may not be feasible at present” [35]. Attempts to define precisely what fieldwork is for are now encountered more frequently. In a state-of-the-art survey of US thinking Monroe has recently reported: “Current statements of rationale for incorporating field experience in the library school curriculum focus not only on bridging between theory and practice but also on sophisticating the student in awareness of the work environment; on sensitivity to personal relationships with staff, supervisors, and clients; or on developing competence in the tasks of professional work” [43]. Drawing on British and Australian experience B.R. Howes has tried to explain what fieldwork is not: “it is not to provide ‘training in the details of doing library work’; it is not a form of apprenticeship; it is not to allow the student to ‘practise librarianship’ (as an equivalent to ‘practise teaching’). It is rather to help the student understand the relationship of basic theory to practice” [48].

6. The ‘core’ curriculum

Given that there are to be library schools, the next question requiring an answer is “What should they teach?” Obviously, constraints of time impose a selective approach, but the choice has to be governed by the obligation borne by any professional school to ensure that its graduates are competent in the fundamentals of their profession – that is to say those basic elements without which, in this case, librarianship would not be librarianship. This concept of a ‘core’ curriculum, defined as “That part of the total curriculum which must be mastered by everyone, no matter what specialization he aims for” [49], developed quite early in library education, but is still a matter for heated discussion.
Perhaps surprisingly, it is not so much the content of such a core that has been argued over, at least until recently – for much of the last hundred years there has been a remarkable degree of unanimity about what Shera has called “the old quadrivium of cataloguing, book selection, reference, and administration” [17]. The debate has concentrated more on whether there is indeed a core, and if so, how can it best be supplemented to meet specialist requirements.

The syllabus for the 1885 Library Association examinations was all core, required of every candidate: as well as a substantial element of general educational (i.e., non-librarianship) subjects it comprised bibliography including cataloguing, and library management and administration. By 1894 the syllabus had confined itself to professional subjects and had settled down to bibliography and literary history; cataloguing, classification and shelf arrangement; and library management – a trivium in fact, rather than Shera’s quadrivium, with book selection, the element apparently lacking, being subsumed under bibliography. This trio of subjects, though examined from 1903 by six papers rather than three, was to remain virtually unchanged until 1933.

Similarly in the United States Dewey’s programme was all core, starting as a list of miscellaneous library techniques and skills based on his analysis of what librarians were actually doing in libraries. Shera tells us that “As many as fifteen or twenty ‘courses’ or ‘units’ were crammed into this year of study, but eventually there was a general acceptance of a ‘core’ comprising cataloguing and classification, reference and bibliography, book selection, and administration” [17]. Fifty years after Dewey in a major review of the curriculum in US library schools, Reece reported that “Surprisingly few items occur in the typical programme of the later years which are not to be found, in rudimentary form at least, in the early study plans” [39]. What had changed, however, was the addition of optional courses on a large scale. Though the core was still required of all students it had been realized that mastery of the core did not of itself prepare the student to enter any and every branch of the profession: children’s librarians and industrial librarians can obviously not spring fully armed from the same programme. For specialist posts specialist courses are needed to support the core. As early as 1923 Williamson found that up to half the students’ time was devoted to optional courses [9].

Similarly in Britain, though for ten years the University of London School, perhaps surprisingly, had stayed very close to the LA core subjects, in 1930 it modified its syllabus to provide a Diploma for Special Librarians. While continuing to maintain that “The present curriculum stands good for every type of librarian”, the School dropped public libraries from the library economy paper, offered the history of science as an alternative to palaeography and archives, and introduced a new paper on special library services.

The LA also took the opportunity in 1933 to introduce options for the first time as part of its major reconstruction of the syllabus into three tiers, elementary, intermediate, and final. Four of the seven final papers were at the candidates’ choice. Though they have since been described as “but pale copies of the elective subjects
which were being offered by the schools of librarianship in the United States” [26],
they marked a distinct step forward. A distinct step backward was the inexplicable
decision to split the tripartite core between the tiers, with cataloguing and classifi-
cation making up the intermediate stage and bibliography and book selection and
advanced library administration appearing in the final stage. By some extraordinary
aberration the intermediate stage was designated as the qualifying examination, and
thus many candidates progressed no further, understandably, since they were able to
call themselves professionally qualified librarians on the basis of a mere third part of
the core. An attempt in 1937 to remedy this anomaly was overwhelmingly rejected
by the membership, and so it was not until after the war that the LA was able to
put matters right again in 1946 with the new ‘Registration’ examination comprising
the traditional core of cataloguing and classification, bibliography and assistance to
readers, and library organisation and administration.

The post-war period of the late 1940s and early 1950s was a time of major structural
change in library education, both in Britain and the United States, but in the revised
curricula there was if anything an even stronger emphasis on the core. It was argued
in the US, for example, that the schools could supply the massive shortfall of 10,000
librarians more quickly if they would agree on a defined ‘core of librarianship’. In
his 1949 UNESCO Manual Danton noted that there was a similar shortage in Britain
and the countries of Western Europe and in China, and that S.R. Ranganathan was
claiming that 120 000 librarians were needed for the libraries of newly-independent
India. He advised his international readers that “there are some curricular elements
which, because of certain purposes and functions common to all libraries, can be
said to be necessary components of the program of any library school . . . a probable
indispensable minimum or ‘core’ curriculum which must be embraced by any library
school” [29]. In 1953 the University of Chicago Graduate Library School sponsored
a conference on the core curriculum and found that support for the concept was
almost unanimous among the 67 librarians and library school teachers taking part,
even among the specialists [49]. In 1954 Leigh found that “there was quite general
agreement on the basic ingredients of the academic professional curriculum. Com-
parison with the courses taught in foreign library schools showed similar agreement
on the core material” [30].

But for the first time the consensus showed signs of breaking down. Leigh him-
self had warned five years earlier that “Almost impossible demands of generalism
are added to formidable requirements of specialization in defining adequate academic
preparation for the profession” [50]. By 1954 he had come to identify the relation
ship of specialization to the general basic programme as the second of five major
problems in library education. As with the first problem he identified (see above) he
acknowledged that it had been “apparent on the horizon for a long time”, but that it
had to be “resolved within the next few years” [30].

Shera has explained why many came to feel that the concept of a core was no
longer viable: “The difficulty lay in the apparent fact that the ‘core’ was not really
a core at all. It was biased throughout in favour of the public library, and much
that the program contained had only marginal relevance to the practice of academic and special librarianship, and almost no relevance to documentation and information science. Indeed for such specialties as school librarianship and library service to children, the core emphasized much that was of dubious value” [17].

The basis of the anti-core position is that librarianship in the field presents such a wide diversity that it is difficult if not impossible to find any common ground where, for example, business librarians, rare-book librarians, and children’s librarians can meet. And even if certain areas of work do appear to be common, e.g. cataloguing, management, the approach required in each case is so different that special rather than general preparation is needed. And an *a posteriori* argument sometimes heard, particularly in the United States, is that a study of the backgrounds of those regarded as outstanding librarians reveals no common denominator of professional education.

In Britain too the 1950s saw the core under attack, and for the same reason: its obvious public library bias meant that it could not really serve as a core common to all branches of the profession. The extension in 1946 of the range of options first introduced in the 1933 LA syllabus had clearly done little to provide for specialised needs. A hastily reconstructed final examination in 1951 failed either to correct the public library bias or to provide for new developments in the field. As mentioned above, by 1953 ASLIB was seriously considering introducing its own examinations and awarding its own qualifications. Though it was to take ten years, the LA did eventually respond with a syllabus designed to meet the needs of all branches of the profession. It was accepted that there had to be a common core, Part I, made up of the traditional subjects, to be taken first by all students before proceeding further. This was in fact similar to what later came to be called, particularly in the US, the “integrated core”, which “tries to identify what aspects of the total process should come first, and then arranges that they indeed do so” [51]. Part II also had to be taken by all students, but they could choose their six courses from a very wide list of options. The limiting factor now was not the syllabus but the schools’ resources, particularly staff. The range of options was sufficient to satisfy the most demanding specialist requirements, provided the schools could teach them.

This was a syllabus designed for non-graduates, but as a concession to the increasing number of graduates entering the profession the LA took the extraordinary decision to exempt them from the Part I examination, the common core, the only part of the syllabus that everyone else was forced to take. Of course the library schools protested vigorously, and a year later the LA introduced a quite separate postgraduate syllabus with a traditional compulsory core and a range of options.

In the US the responses of the schools to attacks on the core concept were naturally more diverse, but the most common was the provision of a wider range of electives. The core was usually retained, but frequently compressed into the first half-year, leaving the second half-year to either the further study of core subjects or to specialised courses.

An increasing number of schools, however, chose sharply to reduce or even to abandon the core: an important influence in the 1960s was the student movement
which asserted the right of the individual to select his own programme of courses. This demand for a ‘curriculum of electives’ was acceded to by some library schools: of the fifteen schools that Conant studied in the late 1970s five required no specific courses and three schools required only one [7].

But the concept of the core persisted and throughout the 1970s authoritative official statements continued to assert its importance. The ALA Standards for accreditation 1972 insisted that a library school should provide for “the study of principles and procedures common to all types of libraries and library services”, and furthermore that “The curriculum should be a unified whole rather than an aggregate of courses” [18]. The section on curriculum in the IFLA 1976 Standards for library schools opened with the statement that “The Curriculum should consist of a unified series of courses and other educational experiences, designed to meet specific program objectives . . . All students should study certain fundamental ‘core’ subjects as well as more specialized electives” [11]. Twelve such core subjects were listed. The standards were noted with approval in the UNESCO 1978 Guidelines for curriculum development in information studies, which went on to list five ‘core’ areas, asserting that “the study of all these areas is essential for a basic course” [12]. In 1980 in his landmark study of library education in the US, carried out for the American Library Association, Conant too recommended “a common educational format for the first professional degree . . . The format should include all the subjects every professional librarian should know or know about, regardless of particular areas of interest or anticipated specialization” [7].

There were several other clear indications of continued support for the core. Not every student was found to be in favour of à la carte curricula. For a number of years the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of California at Los Angeles, experimented “by doing away with required courses, and by placing the major share of the responsibility on individual students for formulating their own study programs”. Their teachers were disappointed to find that “the students voted for required courses in 1974, a landslide of approximately 126 to 5” [52].

Other criticisms were voiced about the unsystematic proliferation of electives: “The addition of courses responding to consumer demand reflects a piecemeal, random approach to curriculum design and construction. A pseudo-specialization has evolved in a most haphazard manner that takes into account transitory enthusiasm, institutional rivalry, and monetary expediency” [53].

Clearly there was much confusion both in and out of the library schools. John J. Boll, for example, identified five major views or attitudes towards core courses, each “utterly different and apparently irreconcilable” [54]. What seemed to have happened was that after generations of accepting not only the core concept but also the traditional core content, those schools turning their backs on the core had failed to distinguish between the two, throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Shera, who recognised the flaws in the traditional core content as plainly as anyone, warned of the dangers of totally abandoning the core concept: “unless there is this common denominator . . . programs will fragment to the point at which chaos becomes a real
threat, or it will become impossible to serve adequately any specialized group except, perhaps, those few for which there is the most active and articulate demand” [17].

Opponents of the concept of a core face a dilemma: if there is no core, what is professional about an occupation that lacks a central essential body of knowledge? The danger of disclaiming a core is not that the profession may split – though of course that is one likely consequence – but that the resulting fragments will lose one professional identity without necessarily gaining another. There are those who do not resist this: Boll argues that “it seems vital to forget our professional mythology of unity . . . We are really a cluster of four or five interlocking sub professions” [54].

In 1978 Guy Marco offered one explanation for the confusion of views that he had found in his study of the core curriculum, from which “it may appear that the American library educator has lost touch with the idea of teaching all students basic meet principles of the profession”. The truth of the matter is, he argued, that changes in core content are reflections of changes in the professional task, e.g., the decline in the need for librarians to undertake original cataloguing. He also pointed to the growth of the integrated core course, sometimes called an orientation or fundamentals course. His conclusion was that “the library schools of the United States are still convinced of the need for core studies, but they are changing their opinions about what these core studies ought to be, and on what method ought to be used in presenting them” [55].

Loyalty to the core, both concept and content, in British schools on the other hand, remained steadfast. The loss of the Library Association’s monopoly over examinations led to no flight from the core: the university and CNAA degree and at diploma syllabuses of the 1960s and 1970s were surprisingly like the LA’s own 1964 syllabus in content. This is partly explained by the desire of the schools to obtain formal approval for their new courses. Radical change is unlikely under the new’ system of course approval (see above), for in 1980 the LA Board of Assessors informed the schools that so far as concerns academic content it will expect “adequate coverage of the main core areas of library management, bibliographical control and information retrieval systems” [56].

Finally, and paradoxically, as librarianship expands its scope and as librarians explore new territory, the need for a core has become more and not less urgent. Giving the closing address to a 1977 workshop at the University of North Carolina on the integrated core curriculum Guy Garrison argued that the objective to seek is a core based on the distinguishing characteristics of all the information professions and upon which can be built all the many information specialties that have emerged. The schools should not be “aiming at re-packaging core courses but at altering the core curriculum, integrated or disintegrated, so that it is truly central to a diversifying profession” [51].
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