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Time to Re-Professionalize the Profession

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Why is it that a profession dedicated to lifelong learning has no Continuing Education (CE) requirement? Embarrassing and even shameful. Consider the following CE requirements:

- Lawyers are required to get 25 CE hours every 3 years in California, including 19 hours covering general topics, 4 covering ethics, and 1 covering the elimination of bias in the legal profession.

- Nurses in Michigan must complete 25 hours with at least 1 hour in pain and symptom management every 2 years.

- Pharmacists are required to complete 15 hours per year in some states and some of those require interaction with the instructor.

- Alabama architects must complete 12 CE hours on health, safety and welfare topics per year.

- Dental assistants in Texas must complete 6 hours per year (12 if they have two “certificates”)

- The AMTA (American Massage Therapy Association) requires their members to complete 48 hours every 4 years.

- Cosmetologists require 8 hours per year in some states.

If you search the ALA site for information about continuing education, you get a lot of dead links, a reference to an old, unrealized action goal (“By 2005, ALA will be a leader in continuing education for librarians and library personnel”), and numerous mentions of conferences. Evidently, attending library conferences is our profession’s idea of continuing education.

I really wish we had a continuing education requirement for librarians. I think we’d be in much better shape as a profession and I also think our libraries would be receiving much better financial support from our communities. CE requirements would help ensure librarians stay abreast of new technologies. Maybe then librarians would understand why technology standards are so important and we’d have more leverage against vendors pushing proprietary solutions instead of standardized solutions. As a technology consultant, I frequently encounter a phenomenal level of ignorance about state-of-the-art technologies that are critical to our profession. CE requirements would help ensure that librarians were better equipped to navigate things, like performance measures and the changing roles of the unions, rather than just throwing up their hands and waiting for that problematic employee to retire. CE requirements would help ensure that librarians would learn more about advocating for their library and fundraising effectively. Maybe they’d learn about new management techniques for service organizations, and find out about trends that pertain to library work.

By making Continuing Education a requirement, it would help ensure that there was always funding for staff to improve their knowledge. It would be a necessary perk of the job. This would help staff stay engaged in topics of critical importance to our profession such as how we deliver content (online, in the library, in the community), stay informed about matters of copyright and our complicated relationship with...
the publishing industry, and how to navigate the challenge of providing convenient and customized services while protecting privacy.

I’m guessing that if we had meaningful CE requirements for librarians, lots of library consultants (like myself) would be out of jobs. Or maybe our jobs would just be different. Instead of being hired to help a single library assess their materials handling workflows so they can make decisions about what technologies to procure based on my analysis, maybe I’d be teaching a CE course to hundreds of librarians about how to do it for themselves. Actually, I did propose doing that for a preconference once (in keeping with the idea of conference as Continuing Education platform) but my proposal didn’t get accepted. Maybe it wasn’t accepted because I proposed it as a preconference – a full day preconference. Our profession seems to prefer to learn in 45-90 minute blocks. Turns out some things take more time than that.

Some states have done a better job than others in providing continuing education opportunities for librarians. My own state of California has been a leader in that effort with the Infopeople Project, a project of the State Library of California. I’m not sure the year it began but by 2006, Infopeople had delivered over 2500 on-ground courses, 70 webcasts and 25 online courses. There are over 360 archived webcasts available on their site today and they deliver 4-6 training events per month (mostly online courses and webcasts these days).

Amigos Library Services is another good source of training, as is OCLC. And many other consortia and State Libraries offer some training too. And like Infopeople, many of these training programs are delivered as one hour webcasts or webinars. Though handy, not everything that librarians should be learning can be conveyed during that one hour webcast / lunch break.

I’ve never been one to settle for what I know. I like learning. I think many people become librarians because they too like learning. Yet, too many of the in-library jobs don’t require librarians to keep learning and they don’t provide time for on-the-job time learning. At least not as a general rule.

In 2011, the Urban Libraries Council and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation partnered with 12 library and local government associations to create the Edge Initiative. The idea was to create a tool for libraries to use to assess their organizations and provide benchmarks so they would know what they should be doing. One of those benchmarks is, “The Library provides staff with work time to engage in technology related learning activities.” I wonder how many libraries said ‘yes’ to that benchmark question?

I’m not sure how active the Edge Initiative is now. It seemed to be the thing for a while. Lots of libraries were doing the assessment, but then what? There are a few trainings offered to Edge subscribers but these trainings look a lot like those other trainings – an hour here and there.

I’d like to see the name “Librarian” mean something more than a person who works in a library.

So, what can we do to get librarians to take continuing education seriously? I’d like to see Librarian mean someone who is committed to staying abreast of information technologies and how to find answers to questions regardless of whether the answers are in reference books, databases, Google, or the Deep Web. I’d like to see Librarian mean someone who understands the complicated nature of copyright and DRM, and publishing, and all things “book,” regardless of format. I’d like to see Librarian mean someone who believes in customer service and understands what that means in this day and age vis-à-vis convenience and customization and customer definitions of private information.
I guess what I’d really like to see is a movement—be it grassroots or at the state or national level—for legitimizing our profession with requirements for staying current. It’s nice that we have a long tradition and all, but being “traditional” isn’t really helping us anymore. It is time to step up and require more of ourselves—Expect More, right Professor Lankes? It’s time to formally recognize—as lawyers, nurses, dental assistants and massage therapists have done—that it takes a commitment of time and effort to call yourself a professional.