LIBRARIANSHIP AND INFORMATION SCIENCE SCHOOLS:
A POINT OF VIEW

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Motto:
    "There is an endless need for education and training"
    (IFLA Reports to the Council, 1991)

Producing and managing information is a dynamic profession and the changes determined by progress in the latter decades permanently impose new professional qualities and skills. The stage of specialisation ensured by an academic frame oriented in this direction is indispensible. On account of the fact that Romanian university level librarianship training re-started a few years ago, the problems linked to the way in which this process of training was launched in this country compared with other countries, has raised my interest. The following article compares these two different systems of training and their structures. I resorted to the information gathered during my visits to Western European universities, in order to judge what can be done so that the generations trained in Romanian librarianship colleges could be at a competitive professional level and become good specialists in this field.

. 1. Information is a vital element in our world. The consumption and production of information became fundamental in this permanently changing society and adaptation to this requirement is coercive. Information must be searched for, found, selected and linked to other information, a process which precedes every activity, intellectual or other. The ability of producing, stocking, organising and retrieving information has increased considerably with the development of specific technology, which has a strong impact on the everyday practice of handling of information. Developments in the field of information technology are more and more comprehensive and the multiple applications in the field endow the expression "information outburst" with a concrete meaning. Not only in education, research, science, art, politics but in everyday life as well, we participate directly to the act of receiving information in our continual need of communication.

The library which, on account of its mission is directly involved in the informational flow is also subject to change, a change which in a paradoxical way

seems to become a constant element of our age. It can be traced to the functions of the library, the nature of its collections and its information tools, the ways of processing and accessing information, the type of services and the quality of assistance offered by specialists in the process of information. The way in which users can benefit, within a reasonable time, from the whole informative potential of an institution of information and documentation as well as the possibilities of using distant information is not indifferent. Librarians as specialists in the field of information must have the capacity of adaptation to the dynamics of the profession and they must be permanently open towards new ideas.

The consumer of information is confronted at present by the multiple problems of the increasing production of information, the development of new technologies in information storage and retrieval, the possibility of accessing a growing number of distant sources, etc. Under these circumstances, an accurate process of information search and retrieval can be efficiently carried on with the specialised assistance of highly qualified information professionals. If we extend the analysis to the other area of the activity in an information institution, i.e. collection development and information processing, information management and producing of information tools to facilitate document retrieval, we can come to the complex professional abilities of a good specialist in the field.

The gaining and development of these qualities is a process founded on instruction, education and specialisation. If we take this seriously, new possibilities of professional emancipation occur; we can require new skills in the use of information, whereas the neglect of the professional "dowry" of each young librarian leads to a disqualification with harmful effects.

2. In the planning of instruction methodology within the modern schools of librarianship we need a realist conception of the supposed attributes of a specialist which cannot lack certain basic aspects. First of all, a specialist must be able to recognize and formulate the general and specific needs of information, and identify the most adequate potential sources. He must be able to develop the most efficient search strategies and know the relevant technologies which might be of help. A good specialist must also be able to evaluate and organise the information in order to communicate them to those who are interested in it and create special instruments which facilitate access to information. Consequently, his intervention is critical and is based on his knowledge of the particular field of information.

Another element which plays an important role is the knowledge and proper administration of the institutional framework in which the librarian works. He must have a basic knowledge of management, know the way of functioning of the library as a complex informational and organisational structure with departments in a strong relation of dependence. Similarly, he must have knowledge of information marketing, a modern and relatively new field, which deals with information as commodity and the principles of need and supply in market economy.

This profession is one of the most dynamic ones, and as its own "substance" is in a continuous evolution, instruction in this field requires a process of permanent adaptation, restructuring and rethinking. All these determine changes in mentality and professional behaviour which must be treated with responsibility within the activity of training new specialists in the field. To sum up, we could say that a specialist in information science is someone who can recognize the fact that information is necessary and is able to locate, evaluate and efficiently use information from a variety of sources; in other words, someone who intervenes decisively in the storage and transfer of information.

3. We must take into account these major directives in conceiving, orienting and developing the objectives of the curricula of librarianship and information science colleges. The fact that we insisted on pragmatic aspects of the field, i.e. modern technology, informatics, institution management and marketing, does not mean that the traditional, humanist training of librarians or the socio-cultural particularities of the different social groups or geographical zones must be neglected in the formation of librarians. Librarians have long been considered men of letters with a well-grounded basic education: this quality must not disappear. However, we must not get stuck in tradition or promote philology and history which used to be the main subjects in the curricula of librarianship education a few years ago.

The year 1990 when librarianship training became a university level marks an important stage in the profession. Naturally, the conceptual, structural and organisational difficulties had not yet been surmounted, which is understandable. There was a long lack of a statutory frame for librarianship education. However, we must not forget the important progress of the last decades, even if it cannot be used as the starting point for the new structure of the librarianship and information science colleges. I do not think continuing academic level training where it was interrupted in the 1970s would be the best solution. This is a field in which new lines of action determined by rapid progress must be quickly adopted. Therefore it is possible to re-start librarianship education at another level.

There is another aspect which should be taken into account. Administratively and functionally the faculties and colleges of librarianship belong to the wider framework of related faculties - the faculty of letters and history - and therefore they are deeply influenced by these, that is, speciality subjects occupy a lesser space in the curricula. Obviously, the reorganisation of librarianship and information science colleges as separate academic entities would be difficult at this stage, from several perspectives, didactic, financial, logistic, administrative, etc. However, it would be welcome and it must be solved in the future.

4. Returning to Cluj from a visit of three weeks to the University of Northumbria in Newcastle and keeping in mind my experiences at Illinois University in Urbana-Champaign and the Catholic University in Washington, I

wondered what is the essence of the huge difference between the training process in the West and that in our country. I do not refer to the evident technological disparity between the West and Romania and the important material resources of academic institutions in the West as compared to those in Romania. This reason would be valid if we would refer only to the great number of librarianship schools which function within Western universities at various levels - university, postgraduate and doctorate levels - which offer basic and optional courses of an extreme variety. It would explain also the way in which practical training is organised in seminars and work sessions in laboratories with a complex technical equipment, permanent access to computers and everything that means an unlimited access to information.

Nevertheless, there are aspects which are not necessarily linked to financing and budgets, technical and informational endowment, logistic and material basis. It would be an oversimplification to explain everything with these disparities which obviously disfavour us. The structuring of the curricula, the methodology of education, interpersonal communication, the professor-student relationship and the vision on the professional qualities which must be developed so that students can progress after graduation do not depend only on these factors imposed by economic, social or even historical conditions.

Curricula in Western universities are extremely flexible. Usually, there is a nucleus of compulsory subjects for all sections and departments of the librarianship schools of a university which offer general and fundamental information for future specialists. Afterwards, various optional courses offer further specialisation. Subjects such as the storage and retrieval of information, information usage, information management and technology (presenting all these from the point of view of the user) are compulsory as basics of the training process. Those interested can study more specialised fields of the activity in libraries, archives, centres of information and documentation, such as information for business, law, art, biomedical and sanitary information, children literature, reference publications, systems of information, publication and editing, archives, the storage and dissemination of information, administering recordings, etc. These subjects can be studied at university as well as postuniversity level. Such a wide span of training possibilities presupposes an adequate teaching staff who can provide courses, seminars and tutorial advising. All these courses and modules are accredited by specialised professional institutions and associations and they are evaluated and revised periodically.

The fact that the number of courses which form the analytical program of Romanian schools of librarianship is still small, is due to various causes, the most important being the economic one and that there are not enough professors. However, if the idea of restructuring the academic programs in order to make them compatible with that of Western universities is unanimously accepted, the necessity of their adaptation to the level imposed by the progress of the last

decades must also be accepted. Debates and discussions are necessary for the introduction of new subjects, but traditional courses must not be neglected either. Such debates in the 1990s produced substantial modifications in the structure of the analytical programs. Some schools of librarianship even modified the name of departments and sections in order to come closer to the new orientation of courses offered. Others have renounced the term 'library' or 'librarianship' to suggest the increasing extension of the fields covered by information science which include libraries, too, but not only.

5. Another aspect which I think plays an important role in the solution of problems of professionalisation is that referring to postgraduate education. There is a growing need for double specialisation as the quantity of information and documents which must be processed and managed is increasing. Those who have university level degrees, be it in the field of humanities, medicine, art, etc. must have the possibility to specialise in librarianship and the science of information, within a masters program. After one or two years of postgraduate training they can obtain the forementioned skills and competences according to international standards with an applicability in libraries, librarianship education and research.

The lack for more than two decades of the possibility of specialisation on an academic level had as its most harmful effects the present lack of teaching staff capable of training new generations of specialists. This has been felt at the foundation of the academic level librarianship and information science education. The latter ensures the training of teachers which is inevitable. Future teachers can thus become familiar with the remarkable progress in this field and, at the same time, graduates of librarianship colleges can continue their studies for further specialisation on masters courses and some of them can even take the doctorate degree.

Another category of beneficiaries of the postgraduate courses of librarianship and information science is that of librarians with degrees in other subjects, many of which have experience and a good knowledge of librarianship. I think that they would appreciate new possibilites of postgraduate studies in librarianship.

6. The basic difference between education in the West and our country is the way in which the educational process is organised, the methodology of teaching, fixing and evaluation. I refer to the methods of interactive education which is predominant in universities abroad and is lacking from our universities.

Students in Western universities are encouraged to become directly involved in the process of education, to be interrogative and completely engaged in the process of the communication of knowledge. Dialogue and open debates are promoted: students are used to expose their arguments in a logical sequence. This is part of the efficient educational process and a valid alternative for the traditional way of teaching. Lecturing while students listen in a passive way, note automatically what has been told and mechanically memorise the courses is not an

efficient way of teaching. If they are subjected to a maieutic way of learning, incited to dialogue and debates and compelled to participate directly, the result is spectacular. Students must be taught how to learn, communicate and organise their time most efficiently. Similarly, they must be able to present their papers, projects and points of view with faith in their capacity of facing a confrontation of ideas.

For example, I had the possibility to participate at the summer session of examination of the students at Northumria University in Newcastle. At the beginning of the university year, students were grouped in fours and each group had a subject of research - regarding most actual and vital topics - which they had to develop in an annual project. The sessions in which I participated were destined to the presentation of these projects in the presence of two professors. The students were extremely skilled, all the more so as the projects and the multimedia support was also done by them, on a highly professional level. In addition I have noticed that students are totally computer literate. Information technology is not taught during university, but students must already have this kind of practical knowledge at entering university as they use it extensively in all courses and projects. Similarly, there is a possibility of selecting from a variety of optional courses in information technology. The presentation of annual projects is similar to job interviews, therefore these exams prepare them for the strong competition for working places.

The whole activity of evaluating knowledge is multi-directional, that is, the most adequate forms are selected in function of the nature of the course. Generally, the simulation of real situations is given a high importance, in order to estimate students' capacity to apply what they have learnt during the year. A variety of methods of examination is used, e.g. annual and/or semestrial reports, personal portfolios, individual and group presentations, case studies, reports, essays, dissertations and not only written or oral exams which have a relative relevance. All these methods of evaluation could probably be applied in our universities, too, and the results would mirror more faithfully the level of assimilation of knowledge.

The application of extremely efficient, modern didactic methods and strategies does not require special effort and it does not imply insurmountable obstacles, it requires only interest and preoccupation on the part of the professors to practise it. Alternative methods to classical courses and theoretical lectures, such as group activities, debates with a rich multi-media support, simulations and case-studies, etc. are, unfortunately, not applied in Romanian education. At the same time, even if things should rapidly change in this direction, our students would need a great effort for adaptation, taking into account that pre-university education does not apply interactive didactic methodology, which is the basis of the development in pupils' creativity and interhuman relations based on real communication.

I have tried to identify some of the most important issues of Romanian

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librarianship and information science education, the problems which require a quick and direct intervention. It is my conviction that the new generations of students as well as librarians deserve this chance.