

## NEEDS AND REALITY IN CONTINUOUS FORMATION

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"*The more enlightened people are, the freer they are...*", free to think, accept, wish and appreciate learning. This thought of Voltaire is the quintessence of, and a strong impulse for, the assertion of the necessity of learning, and its pleasure also. Learning in the librarianship profession means continuous formation, inter-institutional and within the institution. We use the concept of "*continuous formation*" to denote what we have always called "re-training" or perfecting. The term is already validated in the vocabulary of the profession: continuous formation is the activity of assuring a permanent level of professional skills for actual and future activities, by organised forms of instruction.

To speak about this activity in general, ambiguous terms, without analysis and concrete programs, is against the rules of efficiency. Recent changes ask for the renewal of the administration of libraries, which are compelled to tend towards Europeanisation, internationalisation, to confront the new way of information management. First, the concept of *modernisation*, the renewal of public services implies taking into account the needs of the *user* for information and research, an effort to ensure quick access to the immense amount of information.

Students and university professors, the special public of university libraries, are now more numerous and socially diversified; courses are more varied; professionalised university channels diversify. A cause and/or consequence of this is that the university and cultural practices of students and other types of users undergo a change; they no longer imply the same library attendance.

The development of so called "new technologies" is also evident. Their presence in libraries, university libraries mostly, responds to the various needs of access to information (on-line catalogues, databases, CD-ROMs) and allows the completion of the different technical functions of libraries; then, the most elementary application of automation will be its use in the administration of information. However, a predominantly technicist vision of the development of "information science" can lead to regrettable effects in libraries by the one-sided formation of "information professionals". In the context of the globalisation of knowledge and the internationalisation of exchange of information, adaptation to the "world market of training", be it a European or American one, becomes imperative. Models which prove to be functional must be adapted to internal specificities. Let us propose the surpassing of classical librarian/reader exchange

by the structuring of a professional staff capable and willing to modify his working practices and adopt new ones which can be used everywhere. Mobility, multilingualism (in opposition with and completing English as an international language), new technologies and continuous formation participate in the formation of the new librarian/reader relationship.

In the long period when there was no librarianship education, librarians who came from different specialities and fields of activity had to take on a second specialisation. While Western libraries carried out projects of automation and new standard methods for the processing of documents in the 1970s, 1980s and even earlier, the human and administrative *reality* of our libraries only allowed for a kind of "initial training" which meant nothing else than a short initiation course and preparation for the exam for occupying posts, on the basis of the same bibliography which was then prescribed for successive promotions in the library. The training of librarians was carried out at the working place; they were trained for certain segments of activity, limited by routine, seclusion and professional isolation.

Training librarians who were specialists in other fields would have been an extraordinary advantage, had we really advanced towards the new profession. The conscience of professional identity, learning and continuous formation which cannot be avoided, have their say in this matter. Continuous formation will lack coherence and will not have positive results if it is applied by chance, all the more so as it is built on the complete lack of initial training or an unspecific, formal training. It would be ideal if continuous formation would be based on a solid initial training which would teach the staff professional practice, constructing at the same time *professional identity*; continuous formation places knowledge and skills on another level, following developments in the profession, the needs and actual state of the institution, qualities but also personal attitudes and needs (the preparation of a contest or the need for action.)

*The quality of the process* is essential for its success: it depends on the management policy of the institution regarding continuous formation; the library should exploit and motivate the knowledge, experience and qualities of the staff, know it in order to be able to use it.

*The quality of trainers* is also important. Professional skills must have priority in choosing the trainers, otherwise we compromise results. The sole criterion for choosing trainers must be their expertise and their being innovators of the profession. The status of specialist trainer requires professional skills but also pedagogic talent; the capacity of assuming such a task and the function of trainer should be recognised institutionally. Otherwise it creates the impression that it is only an occasion to gain laurels and encourages dilettantism.

Is there a need for a *national policy of continuous formation*? A central structure, based on national policy, can map out and group the necessities of professional training, the valuable experiences of professionals and create a corpus

of programs, courses and applications. In libraries we can find nuclei of such initiatives.

They can only be “positive” if they are the result of *analyses* and *debates*, otherwise they risk to be incomplete in their content or under the level of a possible high standard. A national program of continuous formation intended for university library staff, launched and coordinated by professionals under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, with a considerable budget, can establish and guarantee the link between the recognition of a training and professional identity.

The new, more active methods of training which consider the acceleration of the peremptory knowledge, generate real professionalism and prepare the staff for future changes in the profession and outside it and the capacity to capitalise other types of knowledge during their activity. Professionalism means the will to performance, the capacity to pursue our own professional project (or route) and, most of all, initiative. We need professionals, not ambition without abilities. Continuous formation presupposes a personal and institutional effort; it must be considered an instrument of change in practising the profession, in human relations and, most of all, on a *mental* level. Therefore it cannot be an activity of any kind, but, as any system of learning, it must be an organised process, with structures, plans, programs, evaluations and estimates. Such an organisation is well-perceived by the staff and becomes a really efficient “instrument of work”. People will have to confront the difficulties of the working place market; therefore, librarians who sacrifice a part of their time need and expect to receive a real training in order to face the competition.

National policy and the implication of central organisations is not necessarily connected to the spirit of centralisation. It does not necessarily mean directing, imposing, not even coordination, but the assuring of coherence, an overall vision and simultaneous evolution. A unitary perspective can thus be adopted in defining the modules of long-term continuous formation for the training of specialists.

In the context of institutional autonomy continuous formation must be conceived first on a local level, skilfully, so that it should encompass a great number of staff and be adapted to local requirements. Many activities are characteristic to some libraries only, others are grouped by zones and can encompass more institutions. These are trainings with “classical” themes, general or specialised, and they address the majority of the staff. Other activities address a more limited public (library directors, etc.) or are absolutely new and linked to new policies. Continuous formation always starts from the realities of the profession and has in view progress in speciality. We must not forget the “specificity of the situation”: a training project in our country must always consider age-old (traditional?) mentalities, analyse, measure and draw conclusions from the way they should be modelled and changed. Mental barriers must be studied and made conscious, thus we can locate the individual with *professional conscience* and

*autonomy, initiative spirit and readiness*. When these will be accepted as *values* (instead of industrious, quiet, humble, not coming out of the confines of his office), then we will really be on the threshold of thinking about surpassing the technicism and functionalism of the profession, “we could become librarians who create libraries”. Every library can adopt the changes and evolutions in technical activities (equipment, professional cooperation between services, presentations, speciality lectures, working groups, etc.); costs are not necessarily an impediment. However, what a “librarian” should be, is a more complex question, and this must be taken into consideration in the process of continuous formation, too. Besides professional skills there are some absolutely necessary and “natural” aspects of the librarian’s profile: communication on all levels, the organisation of working time, the edition of projects, participation at meetings (appropriate conduct, language, gestures), partnership, the knowledge of professional literature and contributions to its creation.

The most important impediments of perfecting are either exterior (the institution does not motivate and ask for perfecting or we do not know the possibilities of perfecting and do not exploit our *own* possibilities because of lack of communication and publicity) or interior (self-sufficiency, overestimation or, on the contrary, passivity).

All of them are important and closely related, but those from the second category are more harmful. “Standstill”, the lack of the spirit of action and initiative, staying in the “cone of shadow” and the perpetuation of the *simulating* librarian are their consequences.

The professional culture of the librarian is formed and renewed by permanent training; continuous change induced by the rapid evolution of techniques and equipment compel us to do this training. Neglecting permanent perfecting is most serious when we do not observe or recognize it. Delays also have negative effects.

Continuous formation must be accepted as necessary and possible and it must be implemented in the new librarian/library user relationship imposed by the actual technical reality of libraries; the “coming out of the shadow” of the librarian is a must. We often hear that youth must be the *avantgarde* of change, that they must train themselves or be trained to perform this task. Reality does *not* confirm this natural hope so far; changes are worked out by those who are exigent in their activity and whose sense of belonging to an institution stimulates professionalism and evolution.

*How is continuous formation carried out?*

In an ideal situation continuous formation is a real *institution* which joins more compartments of education and culture, university, school and public libraries and other documentary structures in a common project, which has as its objective the assuring of initial formation for librarians trained in other fields and

the organisation of sessions, programs, forms of permanent perfecting, as well as the formation of staff used in this process.

We do not have such organisations yet, but we can create more simple and realist possibilities by which we can avoid delays.

The logic of perfecting librarians is related to the two directions mentioned above:

-the adaption of specific activities to new systems of work: automation, the evolution of the methods of stocking and accessing information; be it internal administration (acquisition, processing, stocking, conservation) or transmission of information, automation influences and modifies activities, asks for the revision of organisation and work. In this segment of evolution librarians can become high-level professionals, by the training methods offered by the institution.

-the completion of the intellectual and moral profile of the professional librarian.

*Forms of execution:*

Every library can organise:

-short training sessions for different types of activity

-discussions on various themes

-workshops

-the location and spread of documentary materials and the latest publications in the field

-roundtable discussions, seminars

In all of these activities participants must be informed about their aims and objectives, the nature and schedule of activities, the professional category in which they will be grouped after the session, the supplementary or auxiliary tasks they will have to perform and finally, how will the institution benefit from the skills acquired.

Responsibility for the organisation, follow-up and evaluation of continuous formation is a guarantee of its success. Thus we can have an overall vision on the constituents: theme, content, participation, training staff, aims, subsequent needs, collaboration between institutions, organisation. Otherwise our activities will be sporadic or "diluted", with indefinite aims; valuable experiences are often not applied for the benefit of the staff and the whole profession. It is even more serious when the institution does not know and evaluate correctly the professionalism of its employees, and therefore does not properly use its professional and human potential.

A training "file" is appropriately created only if it contains a piece called "session report" and it is efficient only if this is more than a mere piece which fills the shelf. Otherwise the management of training in libraries cannot reach its natural level of importance.

University libraries are an appropriate frame for continuous formation from all points of view. They concentrate activities, staff and experiences and

collaboration is basis on which a proper form of continuous formation can be built. The various forms of communication (telephone, fax, mail, *advertisements*, e-mail and brochures or bulletins) ensure the implication of the staff and facilitate the following of actions. At the same time we must not forget about evolution in professional competence in other types of libraries, and collaborate with them.

The efficiency of participating in training is shown by the degree in which the staff becomes able to accomplish the tasks required by the working place and also future tasks and functions, and by their ability to motivate and support innovating ideas regarding the organisation of specific activities.