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Libraries and Learning

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We must be careful, as librarians, to recognize the differences between "lifelong learning" and "lifelong schooling." If we fail to understand that profound distinction, we will fail in our professional mission. The distinction must also be communicated to, and understood by, the entire library workforce.

Notice that this issue of *OLAQ* is about cognition (an individual process), not about schooling (a social institution). Knowing how our customers process information is essential for our most basic professional practice.

All of us are involved in teaching and learning, whether we are helping someone who is looking for new fly-tying techniques, or we are helping a newly-unemployed mill worker who's never completed a résumé discover the difference between functional and chronological experience summaries. The interaction we call the Reference Interview is the ultimate "teaching moment:" it is a confluence of student-generated subject interest and teacher-based resource availability. This most-human interaction does not require a prepared lesson plan or memorizing Bloom's Taxonomy (though such knowledge can enhance any librarian-customer interchange). It does require familiarity with cognitive processes, and recognition that librarians are at that moment teaching—with or without faculty status.

Socrates did not prepare lesson plans to teach philosophy. Indeed, since Socrates left no written record, our only knowledge of this early Master Teacher comes from the notes of his student, Plato. And yet, who among us would claim that their lesson plans rival the Socratic method in their effectiveness? This is not to say that anticipating learning outcomes is meaningless. Rather, it is to stress that our focus as librarians must be on individual cognition, not on institutional structure.

Distinguishing between "lifelong learning" and "lifelong schooling" has important consequences for students as well as for teachers. As librarians, we are faced with continual change in job-related technologies. Even the rate of change is increasing, so we are dealing with more and more new ways to accomplish our missions. The rate of change is too much for the formal schooling/classroom training approach so common in the 1980s and into the 1990s, yet too many library staff want that safe predictability. How many of us have encountered professional and paraprofessional staff who are using outmoded procedures because they "haven't received any training" in the technology available on their desktops? Their attitude can be a coping skill for the primordial human fear of the unknown ("Here be dragons"), or for punitive management (one cannot be evaluated negatively for skills not formally taught), or just another form of passive aggression in a poor-morale institution. Whatever the cause, the result is the same: an unproductive, closed attitude that the only form of "learning" is "schooling."

Lifelong learning has always been the raison d'être of libraries. We need to recognize that fact, to celebrate it, and to strive continually to apply the principles of lifelong learning to our professional practice.

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