

Mentoring in the Library with Emphasis in Cataloging

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Abstract

Because of the ever changing information management environment, library employees need and benefit from mentoring. This article focuses on mentoring in cataloging. The three elements of effective mentoring are mentor expertise, a mentoring plan, and a good working relationship between mentor and mentee. Strategies are discussed and experiences shared.

Keywords: Mentoring, Cataloging, Librarianship

Digital technology has transformed the landscape of librarianship. Librarians face the challenge of evolving concepts on information management. It seems as though library employees need to learn new skills routinely. Focusing on library assistants, Buchanan (2005) found that as a group they felt this need acutely:

Study participants overwhelmingly see a need for job-related training: 69.5 percent agree that additional training would help them do their job better while only 5.1 percent disagree. Roughly as many (70.3 percent) say they would like more job-related training. When asked about the effect of technology on their job, the need for training is nearly unanimous: 92.8 percent agree that technology has increased the need for ongoing training. (p. 423)

This article discusses mentoring in the library. While mentoring and training are not synonymous terms, their meanings overlap. In this article, the focus is on mentoring. However, at times the terms mentoring and training are used interchangeably. The same is the case for references to either mentees or trainees. This article shares mentoring strategies discussed in the library research and professional literatures with the context of cataloging in mind. To these are added

insights from my personal cataloging and mentoring experiences in the university sector. These strategies can apply both to one-on-one mentoring and to group training.

The following example from DeZelar-Tiedman, Camden, and Uhl (2006) illustrates the need for mentoring in the library. The Committee on Education, Training, and Recruitment for Cataloging (CETRC) which is under the umbrella of the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS) planned to announce its pilot mentoring program to a select group through the *ALCTS Newsletter Online*. However, the announcement was inadvertently sent to Autocat, a busy listserv devoted to issues related to cataloging. To the surprise of committee members, a large number of catalogers expressed an interest in participating in the mentoring program. The committee found itself “unprepared to handle the resulting high level of response” (p. 19).

Moreover, the challenge of limited library funding and personnel shortage anticipate the need for mentoring. To maintain library services, academic libraries employ student assistants or paraprofessionals to perform tasks which were once the domain of professional librarians. (Buchanan, 2005; Constantinou, 1998). Other libraries solicit the service of volunteers or retired librarians.

The term “mentoring” is derived from Mentor, a character in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In this Greek epic, Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War and would be away for many years. He entrusted his household to Mentor who served as the teacher or overseer of his son Telemachus. As the tale unfolds, this Mentor guides Telemachus through many dangers and the story has a happy ending. “In time, the word *Mentor* became synonymous with trusted advisor, friend, teacher, and wise person” (Shea, 1997, p. 3).

For mentoring to be effective, it must involve more than mere information transfer or the teaching of know-how. Ragins and Kram (2007) defined mentoring as “a relationship between an older, more experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced protégé for the purpose of helping and developing the protégé’s career” (p. 5). Seal (2015) describes the mentor as one who is ready “to share work experience, both successful and otherwise, with new and mid-career librarians” (p. 566). As noted by Zhang, Deyoe, and Matveyeva (2007), “Mentoring is a historically established method of one-on-one learning. In ancient Chinese society, a skilled worker was often trained through apprenticeship” (pp. 1-2).

Elements of Effective Mentoring

There are three elements of effective mentoring: (1) mentor expertise, (2) a mentoring plan, and (3) relationship with the mentee. These will be discussed below.

Mentor Expertise

Simply having the basic knowledge and skills of a subject to be taught is not sufficient for effective mentoring. The mentor must have expertise, that is, an in-depth knowledge and experience of the field. A librarian who may have taken courses in cataloging and classification for a library degree but has not been immersed over time in its theory and practice would face difficulties in mentoring. The same limitations would also apply to the other branches of librarianship.

Mentor expertise means the mentor has both mastered the philosophical and overall framework of the discipline, as well as extensive detailed knowledge of its various aspects. For example, in cataloging, the mentor knows the purpose and structure of AACR2 and RDA and their relationship; the content and use of a classification scheme, subject headings, and authority records; and is engaged in the disciplinary conversations on current issues. It does not mean that the mentor has immediate and comprehensive recall of every rule of RDA, LC subjects or MARC codes, but is adept in using these cataloging tools, with a clear overview of their details and nuances, and would know what to do when a difficult case arises. In one study on mentoring failures, lack of mentor expertise was frequently reported as a cause (Eby, Buits, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004).

Mentors with this level of qualification are able to teach the subject. They can answer specific questions *and* provide information relevant to the topic. In my mentoring, I was surprised but pleased to hear student assistants asking challenging questions beyond the basics of the topic. They would have been disappointed with me if my responses or comprehension of the topic were superficial.

Mentoring Plan

A pilot needs a flight plan before boarding the plane. A contractor needs a building plan before purchasing the materials for a home construction project. Likewise, a mentor needs a mentoring plan before beginning the relationship. As Williamson (1993) advises, a mentoring plan equips the mentor

to provide advice and facilities to enable members of staff to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to perform effectively the duties for which

they were employed, and to develop themselves in order to meet the future needs of both the organization and the profession. (p. 28)

The first thing that a mentor should do in preparing a mentoring plan is to identify the task specifications. Kathman and Kathman (2000) suggest a “well-written job description” that clarifies the expectations of the job (p. 179). Secondly, the training plan should include training needs of the individuals or groups to be trained, and the steps to be taken to meet those needs. (Williamson, 1993). Thirdly, knowing the background and competency level of the individual mentee is a necessary consideration in the mentoring plan.

Once the needs have been clearly identified, the mentor can set the objectives. The mentor should be clear what the mentee is expected to accomplish and communicate this to the mentee from the beginning (Lee, 2011). Based on the needs of the mentee, the mentor then prepares a plan so that the mentee gains the essential knowledge, performs the task, and develops a positive attitude towards successful competence (Cuffy & Persson, 2013).

In my experience, I have spent more time preparing the mentoring plan than in the actual mentoring. In preparation for a cataloging training workshop to be held at the James White Library, I identified the needs of the expected attendees based on job descriptions and work experience. Among them, I discovered a broad spectrum of prior knowledge and experience. Some were already familiar with OCLC and Millennium, LC standards and cataloging rules. But others were newly minted novices who had yet to learn the basics of MARC codes. With this in mind, I prepared introductory materials including a glossary of cataloging terms. While this might have been foundational new information for the novice, it also served as a review or refresher for the advanced participants. The needs analysis aided in preparing the training materials that would benefit as many of the expected attendees as possible without leaving any behind.

Mentor/Mentee Relationship

Parents who reinforce the good behavior of their children with commendation and encouragement are investing in the success of their children’s future. However, parents who are sharp and quick to find fault with their children are paving the way for discouragement and low affective achievement. The same is true with mentoring. The attitude of mentors toward their mentees largely determines the outcome. Maxwell (2008) describes the reward for supporting others:

Mentoring leaders get more out of their people because they think more of their people. They respect and value them, and as a result, their people want to follow them. The positive, uplifting attitude that they bring to leadership creates a positive working environment where everyone on the team has a place and purpose—and where everyone shares in the win. (p. 44)

Mentoring always involves a relationship. Mentors may take this relationship for granted and focus solely on giving instructions and seeing that the job is done, or they may also encourage their mentees and help them grow and realize their potential for success. Providing support and rapport are important elements to effective mentoring (Eby et al., 2004; Freedman, 2009).

When mentors have a positive attitude, it facilitates the learning process of mentees and increases their level of usefulness and satisfaction in their job. Mentors with a positive attitude can use an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of mentees for growing their potential. This is particularly important in mentoring for cataloging. The details and intricacy of cataloging rules, standards and codes are so complex that it is easy for paraprofessionals and student workers to get discouraged or overwhelmed. Giving support and establishing rapport helps the mentee navigate the complexities and difficulties in cataloging (Xu, 2014).

A mentor who provides unconditional support and establishes rapport has a keen eye for the mentee's growth and success. The aim is for the employee not only to improve in work performance but also grow in responsibility. As Seal (2015) explains, "A conscientious mentor gives his or her mentees increasing responsibility to challenge and test them in order to evaluate their work and ability to operate under stress" (p. 556). Effective mentoring anticipates that the mentor must be willing to see the mentee get ahead. According to Maxwell (2008), "The greatest leader is willing to train people and develop them to the point they eventually surpass him or her in knowledge or ability" (p. 74).

Benefits of Effective Mentoring

Mentoring costs much time and money, however, it is an investment that provides both short-term and long-term dividends. In the short-term, mentoring leads to the accomplishment of the job description for which the employee has been hired. Effective mentoring, however, brings long-term benefits to the institution, the mentor and the mentee.

The practice of mentoring benefits the organization. Effective mentoring helps bring stability to the work force of the institution; it helps decrease employee turnover and increases job satisfaction among employees; it promotes productivity

and uplifts the morale of the employees. This is indeed the case for the library profession. Zhang et al. (2007) note that:

The library profession in the U.S. continues to face challenges of recruiting and retaining librarians with diverse backgrounds. Mentoring is an effective method of retention. It helps the development of trusting professional relationships among librarians; helps new librarians to adapt to the new environment; helps improve intergenerational cooperation; and helps in teambuilding. A productive mentoring relationship increases job satisfaction by new librarians, cultivates healthy work environments, and sustains the organizational culture of the libraries. (p. 1)

Freedman (2009) reiterates these benefits in her study. “Putting it all together, mentoring contributes many organizational benefits. These benefits include increased employee retention, reduced turnover, faster new employee induction, guidance to organizational expectations, and improved leadership” (p. 173).

The practice of mentoring benefits the mentee. Benefits for the mentees or trainees include gaining necessary work skills, increased job competence, and a broader perspective of the work at hand. Mentoring paves the way for mentees, especially paraprofessionals and student assistants, to transition to the profession (Hallam & Newton-Smith, 2006). It also helps prepare established librarians for promotions, higher salaries and greater job satisfaction (Lee, 2011).

The practice of mentoring also benefits the mentor. Mentoring takes much time and effort on the part of the mentor. Mentoring helps keep the mentor sharp and up-to-date in the field. Preparing materials or lessons requires reviewing and keeping abreast of new trends and issues. Among my most satisfying experiences as a librarian has been in assisting other librarians in the learning process, and then observing them engage their tasks with increased job satisfaction and enriched contributions to the institution (Xu, 2014).

Mentoring Strategies in Cataloging

This section will focus on some general mentoring strategies in cataloging. These include providing an overview of the task, moving from general principles to specific details, and finally, practicing the task.

Overview Approach

One of the first steps in a mentoring strategy is to provide the mentee with an overview of the task. How does the task or skill fit into the larger picture of library services? Why does completing the task matter? Why is the institution willing to pay for the work to be done well?

One example of this approach is the library orientation to new student assistants. As Slagell and Langendorfer (2003) advise,

In training, include a general library orientation, so the student employee gets a sense of the 'big picture' – the physical library, the work of the library, and who the major players are (dean, associate dean, department head, etc.) Utilize your policies and procedures as the foundation for teaching the job and be explicit about the work the student employee is to perform. (pp. 281-282)

In mentoring for cataloging, giving an overview is imperative. This includes providing a summary picture of AACR2 and RDA, MARC, OCLC and the integrated library system. A workflow chart shows how these are interrelated, and the roles each plays in the cataloging task. This is followed by an overview of the cataloging tools such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings and Classification schedules. This will inform mentees where their specific task falls in the workflow.

General to Specific

In introducing any of the items above, the use of the general to specific pattern proves invaluable. For example, in teaching the Library of Congress classification schedules, I start with an overview of the LC classification. After introducing the outline of the classification, I explain the main classes. I then follow up with subclasses which are further subdivided for various purposes. Within the subclasses, a pattern or general arrangement may be observed in the classification. This usually starts with form divisions followed by specific aspects of the discipline. The form divisions is usually followed by philosophy, history, biography, general works, study & teaching, etc. This is the format that is generally used repeatedly within subclasses. And so forth, *ad infinitum*.

Examples and Exercises

For each point in the pedagogical process, the use of appropriate examples helps the mentees learn the lesson. Most can remember the rules when they see

them applied in a concrete setting. For example, using the technology to accomplish a task is like learning to play a new piece of music on the piano. It takes practice. So as a way to practice the lesson, I introduce structured exercises, beginning with simple exercises, progressing one concept at a time towards increased complexity. As the mentees master one concept or skill, I provide them with the next set of exercises building on what they now know, adding the next steps. Within reason, the idea is to have a fresh set of learning exercises prepared for each meeting. The intention is that following this pattern fosters attentiveness and an alertness for details.

Mentoring In Action

The most memorable mentoring experience I have enjoyed took place in March 2014. Middle East University in Beirut, Lebanon invited me to conduct a training seminar for the personnel of the George Arthur Keough Library. The University's School of Theology wanted the Library to re-catalog the Islamic, Arabic and theology collections from Dewey Decimal to the Library of Congress Classification (St. Clair & Jordana, 2014).

When I met the library personnel on the first day of the training seminar, I could sense some hesitancy and doubt on the viability of the project beneath the warm welcome and smiles. This was understandable as George Arthur Keough Library had consistently used the Dewey Decimal Classification since it was established on the campus of Adventist College of Beirut in 1939. The Library did not have Library of Congress (LC) cataloging tools. My task as a mentor was to introduce them to Library of Congress resources and how to use them.

In an intensive four day seminar, I provided the librarians with an overview of the LC tools for cataloging. I introduced them to Classification Web, which is the online version of the LC cataloging tools, and the basics of RDA, significant MARC codes, and other details of the classification schedules.

The support I provided and rapport we established helped them accept and apply LC cataloging for their library. Their willingness to go over the cataloging details, and their patience and persistence impressed me. They came to see the advantages of LC over Dewey in organizing a large academic library collection as they visualized the framework of LC classification and subject headings. They gained competence and confidence as they embarked on the re-cataloging process. From time to time after I returned to Andrews University, the Middle East University library staff emailed me with cataloging questions which I promptly answered.

In an email I received May 4, 2015, the library informed me they had finished re-cataloging the Islamic, Arabic and Theology collections and had decided to re-catalog the rest of the library's collections.

Conclusion

Effective mentoring is not something that just happens. It is not simply a conveying of information or skills. Rather, it is a result of careful planning by a mentor with expertise in the field and hard work on the part of both the mentor and mentee. It provides an environment where mentor and mentee interact and exchange ideas.

A final consideration is that mentoring is a relationship. And it is just as imperative that the would-be mentor remember that the would-be mentee is also choosing. As Ptolomey (2008) reflects:

How do you choose a mentor? There are a few characteristics that should be considered: mentors should be successful in their own field, ethical with no personal agendas, analytical in ascertaining what is required, willing to give time, have a strong commitment to helping, able to see the big picture, and have integrity. There must be assurances of confidentiality and a question of honesty from both parties. (p. 310)

With a clear mentoring plan, the development of rapport, and the provision of support, the mentor can help to prepare the mentee to face the challenges of working in an academic library setting. Perhaps the most important aspect of preparing for a mentoring opportunity is to become the kind of person that a mentee would value as a mentor.

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