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EDITORIAL

In late October, I was invited to a two-day seminar in Washington, DC, for the purpose of helping Tony Debons plan for a second edition of his book, *The information professional: survey of an emerging field* (Dekker, 1981), which was based on his earlier study, *Manpower requirements for scientific and technical communications*. A large part of the effort of the group assembled (a multidisciplinary mix of professionals from academia, government and the information industry) was directed to the task of defining and describing 'information,' 'data,' 'information profession,' etc., as well as the variety of components of the field and how they all relate to each other. Even for this group, that collectively had hundreds of years of experience working, teaching, researching and writing in the field, the task was challenging and the results were, to my view, disappointing. Debons did not appear to be discouraged, however, and cheerfully promised to clean up our work and feed it back to us later for our further commentary and revision.

Recently there was yet another faculty meeting in my library school at which we lamented the poor performance of some of our students in the comprehensive final examination. We debated whether the format, length and timing were appropriate and whether we had asked the right questions. We agreed, however, that some students cannot adequately synthesize all that they have supposedly learned in 36 hours of coursework.

How do these two discussions relate to each other? In the first case, experienced professionals were having difficulty synthesizing and articulating some of the most fundamental concepts of the field, and in defining the multidisciplinary nature and borders of it. In the second case, students, at the end of their masters program, were facing a similar challenge. In a way, the students, although more inexperienced, were better prepared; they had just completed their coursework and were mentally geared up for the comprehensive exam. Nonetheless, many of them had difficulty writing integrated answers to our broad questions. Faculty members who were candid admitted that even for us the questions might be challenging.

How can schools expect their students to do what the faculty finds difficult? How can the faculty, many of whom are focused in a narrow specialty area and speak in their own jargon, help the students to understand the interdisciplinary nature of the information field, to see the connections between its parts, to draw the analogies between functions in traditional librarianship and modern records management and information analysis? How can students be expected to do this without guidance?

There is of course no simple answer to this rhetorical question, but there are ways that library schools can help students to better understand the 'big picture.' At the beginning of the program, many schools require one or more 'core' courses. The usual point of these is to cover topics, train skills and competencies, and instill

attitudes that all students, regardless of their area of concentration, should have. These courses can do more than that, however; they can help students understand the structure and outlines of the entire field and the connections between the parts of it. In my own course, 'Organization of Information,' for example, I try to show explicitly how accession numbers, natural and artificial classification numbers, subject headings, index terms, abstracts and extracts are all surrogates for documents, which come in a wide variety of formats, but are all simply 'material carriers of information.' Different document surrogates are used for different purposes, to organize different types of information for different user populations. The students should see, however, that there are many points of similarity among them.

Another type of course offered by some schools is an introductory course, of six or more credit hours, in which a variety of basic topics common to all areas of the field are addressed by a succession of faculty, each of whom has a particular expertise. There is an even greater danger here, when the teacher changes almost every class period, that the links between topics will not be made. Students cannot be expected to grasp the connections themselves; someone must help them to put topics in a broad context and to relate them to each other.

Part way through the program, students may begin to specialize in a certain aspect or area of the field. It is possible here to design courses that synthesize a variety of topics in a particular area. A course on medical librarianship, for example, may integrate management, collection development, users, reference services, bibliography, technical services and technological innovations.

At the end of the program, a comprehensive examination, as mentioned above, can also be an exercise in integration and synthesis. An alternative to an examination is a comprehensive paper (in contrast to a masters thesis, which requires the student to focus on a narrow research topic).

Perhaps there are more ways, both curricular and extracurricular (colloquia, lunchtime discussion groups, practicums), to accomplish the goal. The point is not to leave it to chance. Some students manage on their own to do it, but many others do not. Students are entering a field that is multidisciplinary and constantly changing, whose borders are not clearly marked, in which basic concepts are not well defined, and terminology is not standardized. Anything we can do to help orient them will be of benefit to them and to the profession.

Trudi Bellardo
Associate Editor