British Columbia Library Association Conference, Conference Paper (April 9, 2011)

**Title**  'Beyond Library 'Science': (Artsy) New Professionals Reflect on Research

**Description**  In light of the increasing emphasis on librarians as scholars, this panel will draw attention to the limitations experienced by new professionals with humanities backgrounds who are operating in an LIS research environment dominated by (social) science methodologies and perspectives. As well as highlighting barriers created by invocations of "pragmatism" that align research support chiefly with quantifiable outcomes, the panel will also deepen understanding of the value of critical humanities methods to the profession. Discussion and networking within the session will hopefully also lead to collaborations in support of a more truly diverse research environment.

**Panelists**  Dave Hudson, Learning and Curriculum Support Librarian, University of Guelph
Erin Fields, Reference Librarian at University of British Columbia

The idea for this discussion came about around a year ago when Dave approached me after a presentation I gave at the Ontario Library Super Conference.  Dave and I had a discussion about the barriers in research which fall outside of the social science or scientific research perspectives and out of this conversation Dave asked if I would be interested in engaging in discussion around critical humanities research in librarianship as a "new" professional who has background in this kind of research focus and has a strong desire and obligation to engage in research.  This discussion today comes from our initial conversation.  This discussion stems from concerns we have in deploying critical humanities methods in library research and how we feel a barrier in engaging in this type of research as new practicing librarians.  Now, what do we mean by "critical humanities methods in library research" exactly?  Well, part of the issue is that we've had a bit of a hard time finding examples of publications from within the kinds of research communities to which we feel drawn.  But there are a few that we've come across, to be sure.  So, we're talking about work that, for example, identifies the social construction of knowledge and how this influences information seeking behaviours and practices or, to cite another example, how class, power and the creation of knowledge are interrelated and the library or librarian as neutral is illusory.  These sorts of papers depart from traditional research and approach library and information scholarship from a place of reflection, speculation and criticism.

This discussion is not, however, going to be an in-depth literature review.  While we will be drawing on some of the material we've come across, our central goal is to talk about our experiences of disciplinary barriers within LIS and about the ways in which library research would be different if more space were made for critical humanities methods within the profession. Also, we would like to address the possible implications of collaboration between librarians on this type of research and how that could affect the field more broadly.

Recently I read this article about a reference questions review within a smaller university library.  As with most studies the article was broken into an introduction, question statement, a literature review, methodology, data analysis, and conclusions.  The author performed a study

of almost 7000 reference transactions at a desk to determine how many of the transactions require the presence of a librarian and applied a cost-benefit analysis indicating the average cost of a reference interaction based on the salary of a librarian.

After reading article I felt dissatisfied, and this was a reaction that was separate from my feelings about the conclusions expressed in the article, which I have very strong opinions but is somewhat outside of this discussion.

What was interesting about this reaction was I was not able to articulate what my dissatisfaction was for a time, although now reflecting on my background and experiences it has become clearer. When I usually read something I am unhappy with, I react on a completely emotional level. I remember complaining to my colleague about the article expressing without any clearly articulate reasons as to what my concern really was with the research. I remember her looking at me with a smirk, saying "Erin, what is *really* wrong?" Perhaps this was her attempt to lighten the situation but the question was really illuminating. What was the real problem? This article wasn't the only piece that has caused this inarticulate feeling of dissatisfaction. A year ago I presented a conference paper on activist images of librarians in popular culture and the role of librarians as "protectors" both in action and in values and I was enormously surprised that I was accepted for the conference. It was an unusual choice as I was situated with individuals talking about budget lines and development of instructional programs. When I was emailing all of my confirmations about the session, I was told my session provided "flair" to the rest of the series. While I believe this was meant as a compliment and I certainly took it as such, I also had the sense that the presentation was meant as a respite from the "serious" material. This was disconcerting. The idea that my commentary on this issue was so outside of the mainstream scholarship that it could be consider kitsch or entertainment did not sit well with me and it began a process of questioning the value of my work that was focused on critical reflection and not practical outcomes. I questioned who I was writing this for and the potential need to modify or erase material that perhaps was consider too heady for my audience. When looking at the conference work coming from my colleagues, I wondered if there was a place in the dialogue for an evaluation of morality and ethics in the profession as presented in public spaces like television and film? And if so, where?

I have tried to write that conference paper into a full article but these questions are plaguing me during the writing process as I'm not sure where this research fits in the scheme of library and information scholarly output and whether the value of that particular work can been seen outside of an entertaining break from the "real" scholarly work.

So, to put it in a way my colleague expressed it, what is my problem?

This talk for me is a way of articulating the roots of the "dissatisfaction" I feel when reading and engaging in library and information research. I want to use this discussion to look at the tension I feel as a young practicing librarian, whose interest in research sometimes moves outside of the "tips & tricks," best practices, and practical applications of scholarly work.

I would like to focus my discussion on the tension between library and information studies as practice and library and information studies as scholarship and how some of the difficulties I believe exists is due to the education I received in library school; the practice of librarianship and the scholarly output that is rooted in practical/managerial perspectives and social science

methodology; and perhaps a lack of understanding from the profession as to where humanities based analysis can fit into the scholarly output of librarians and information professionals. I will also discuss one of the ways I see critical humanities methods apply within the scholarship of library and information studies.

The discussion surrounding the issue of library and information studies as practice and as scholarship are rooted in age-old problems of the purpose of education. In *The University in a Corporate Culture*, Gould (2003) performs a historical survey of education that highlights the social mission and ideals of learning. Through the historical survey Gould examines educational traditions that are philosophically rooted in the growth of the intellect in contrast to education for the purpose of a goal, or knowledge for exchange for power or position. Gould writes, "… for centuries the knowledge derived from liberal learning has always seemed to embody a tension between utilitarian outcomes and learning for its own sake" (p. 149). I do not want to place critical humanities theory or any theory within the "learning for it's own sake" category, but what I believe Gould is saying is the growth of knowledge that falls outside of a practical application to a given problem is a part of an educational tradition of inquiry for the purpose of knowing or more clearly put, the purpose of the pursuit of educating the mind. This tension between approaches to education certainly applies when examining professional schools. For library and information studies, the focus on utilitarian or "practical applications" of both the university degree and scholarship has very deep roots (Gould, 2003).

Research on the tension between the "utilitarian" and "learning for its own sake" has been examined as it relates to library and information faculty and education. Richard Cox (2010), identifies the knowledge and information guiding library and information coursework is rooted in the process of "chasing credentials" to apply to a specific trade (p. 182). Both the literature states and as Dave noted earlier in his conversation with a colleague -- students want "to become practitioners rather than full time scholars." The expectation of students entering the schools is to gain the degree to apply to the field but due to this focus on the utilitarian in library education, departments do not foster, what Cox terms, the, "… asking of questions, as they often seem to possess a focus on pat systems of practice designed to reassure tuition paying students that they are gaining basic tools by which to ply a trade"(p. 201). This causes "…confused signals between education and training..."(p. 184). In this sense, education for Cox takes on the critical and reflective process that comes with engaging in texts, something he feels is lost in library and information studies, which comes from the traditional notion of "learning for its own sake" (Cox, 2010) (Gould, 2003).

In my own library education I completed courses in collection development, library management, reference practices, and cataloguing, which focused on process over critical reflection – practicality over philosophical or speculative engagement. While I do not want to claim that the education I received as a library student was not beneficial, I do feel now as a practicing librarian who has both the interest and pressure – and I use that term very loosely -- to engage in scholarship, the theoretical underpinning of my library school degree has in some ways limited how I think of approaching research. These courses, as Dave discussed earlier, focused on research that excluded the possibility of selecting from a variety methodologies for a given research problem as the only methodological approach discussed was that of the practicality of scholarship within a social science perspective. This exclusion was a bit perplexing and complicated for me, as a student who's past scholarly engagement did not solely come out of the social science tradition. As with Dave, I come from a background that, to my mind, is not

necessarily represented in library scholarship and training.  I completed a degree in Communication Studies with a focus on media discourse around gender, race and class.  This kind of interdisciplinary scholarship focused on feminist, marxist, and critical theory.  To give you a sense of the type of research I engaged in I wrote a major paper that examined government funding of Native telecommunications and print media organizations and the effect this had on discourse as it related to such issues as First Nations treaties, land claims, housing, and reparations from the injustice of residential homes.  The paper discussed how financial power structures sustained a form of covert censorship on the freedom of expression and thought in the journalistic practices of Native Peoples in Canada as it related to potentially sensitive political issues.  This was the kind of scholarly engagement I had become accustomed to; however once in library school, I was immersed in gaining a knowledge base rooted in the practical application of research determined by experience and using scholarly methods designed to "solve problems".

While it is clear from Cox's (2010) commentary that faculty and scholars certainly feel the constraints of utilitarianism within library and information departments.  It is also clear that as a library student, I felt certain tensions in my own studies in library school due to a program of study that wasn't reflective of my past education.  However, for me, the larger concern about this focus on practical application in library and information education is the divide between "practice" and "asking questions" and that it becomes less visible when students become practitioners. Because knowledge that focuses on the reflective, speculative, philosophical or critical, was lost within my library and information education as the focus was on training the practitioner, when I gained entrance into academic librarianship and turned to thinking about research and publishing my thoughts around formulating research questions began reflecting an overall theoretical approach which governed the field.

The focus in library education on social science perspectives is largely reflected within the field of practice.  Librarians within the field are required to balance budgets, manage staff, and develop programming and due to this the scholarship is affected. There is a very practical element to the work that we do.  In my experience, although this has support in the literature, both in education and practice, librarianship has been governed by notions of practical approaches to problem solving and management of resources which include both human (e.g. staff) and financial (e.g. collection budgets).  With the problem-solving approach to library and information practice comes scholarship that I see as rooted in "tips and trick" or "best practices."  This kind of scholarship focuses on the problem and ways the problem can be solved and how to apply these practices to similar situations for similar outcomes.   As Pawley (1998) illustrates within management perspectives library and information practice is focused on inputs and output models and how best to deploy the resources for the greatest outcomes. The focus then is on making decisions that are based on quantifiable and measurable outcomes.

For practicing librarians, this may not seem problematic.  Often our work is tied to budgetary constraints and the process of providing measurable data that will increase support for serving a large portion of library users is efficient and, in many ways effective. The reporting of successes is a way to maintain continued support and reporting these outcomes within library journals and conferences is also effective at providing other practitioners models of service that could benefit their own library system.

In my career as an academic librarian, my initial research focused solely on the managerial and

practical problem-solving approaches to research.  I've written articles and presented sessions with social science frameworks such as: *Tutoring the Virtual Student – An Instructional Framework for Information Literacy Objectives in Chat Reference, Preparing the Front Line – Designing a Training Program for new Librarians,* or *Liaising in the Between - A Plan for Interdisciplinary Outreach*.  All of these papers reflected the practical work that I was directly engaged in.  I was a coordinator for virtual reference and needed to develop instructional models for virtual reference provision.  I was a coordinator for part-time librarians and needed to develop a program of training and professional development.  As an interdisciplinary liaison librarian, I needed to develop a program of outreach to faculty and students with librarians in their "home" departments.  My scholarship reflected directly my work and I was successful in gaining entrance to library conferences and publications with this work because I was "speaking the language" of library 'science.'  I was speaking to the practical and managerial aspects of library work.

Dave noted in his own presentation, the focus on the social science methodological approach to library and information scholarship creates a system of "acceptable" and "unacceptable," or "legitimate" or "illegitimate" research -- and I use those loaded terms in reflecting on Dave's conversation about the scholar-practitioner's rejected article that didn't fall within the standard social science headings.  The research I engaged in early on certainly falls within the realm of the practical/managerial and was given 'space' within conferences and publications; however, this dominant scholarly discourse within library and information scholarship can silence alternate starting points for intellectual work for practicing librarians.   The initial "silencing" of critical humanities research approaches comes from library schools focus on practical application within a social science perspective.   By focusing on social science methods practicing librarians are initially excluded from conceptually thinking or knowing about critical humanities theories in connection to library scholarship.   This initial lack of knowledge around non-social science methodologies and approaches to scholarship is compounded when students become practitioners. While I knew of critical humanities research because of my background, once in the profession I felt limited in engaging in this kind research because of what I was introduced to in terms of "acceptable" scholarship.  I must say, I have never directly been told that I could not engage in humanities based research as a part of my research portfolio; however, the kind of research that I am surrounded by does not reflect this kind of scholarly engagement, which perhaps unintentionally, acts as a deterrent.

I believe, due to this introduction to library and information scholarship both in my education and as seen within practice, a situation is created– and I do not believe necessarily this is intentionally done - where 1) practicing librarians scholarly engagement will preference practical application and social science methodologies over all others; 2) practicing librarians may only see the benefit of scholarship if it relates to what Bill Crowley (2005) terms in, *Spanning the Theory-Practice Divide*, "useful theory" which is theory that agrees with practical experience, that is effective in a variety of settings and yields results (p. 18); 3) Once inside the practice of librarianship, where librarians are bound by not only the day-to-day practices but the need to justify these practices through measurable outcomes, may not see the use or need of critical humanities study within library and information work – and with this perception of "uselessness" behind research approaches that do not come from the social sciences perspectives, a situation can occur where the critical social debates around libraries and information is relatively ignored or, as Pawley (1998) states, "…stigmatized as "airhead" or "philosophical" (technical)…" (p. 132) or in the case of my own conference work, deemed as

escapism from the "real" scholarly work.

This potential stigmatization of critical humanities work within the profession causes me to question the importance of the research I am interested in performing, the audience I am engaging with in terms of not only their knowledge of this kind of research but the degree to which they are open to the discussion, and the place of my research in the professional literature and conferences.  If the library and information education and scholarship are prone to focus on pragmatic approaches, do publications or conferences that focus on libraries have space for work which lies outside of this perspective?   I found a place at a conference with a textual analysis of media representations of librarians but the conference presentation was designed to touch on issues without going into depth about the theory driving my ideas.  I wanted it to be accessible to an audience that I thought was looking for "flair".   But what about the paper that provides a more in-depth discussion about, for example, the popular culture image of librarian superheroes as problematic due to the librarian personae being relegated to the secret identity which acts as contrast to the hyper-masculinized superhero personae, thereby defining desirable masculinity in contrast to the undesirable feminine characteristics such as weak, passive, demure or shy, that are historically associated to the profession of librarianship.  Does this feminist critique have a place in library literature or conferences? I am not sure.

An excellent example of this type of exclusion is with this particular discussion we are having today which had been turned down by two large conferences before finding a space at BCLA, as noted by Dave earlier.  In looking at the workshop offerings for those two conferences, it is no surprise to me as to why we were excluded.

While there is discussion in library literature that relates to the value of critical humanities perspectives, the discussion appears to me to have a top-down approach.  Library and information scholarship from a critical humanities perspective, as far as I am aware, is coming from our faculty scholars and not from practicing librarians.  The discussion of the value of critical theory in librarianship comes primarily from faculty researchers who mention the benefit of this theoretical approach as a tool to critique utilitarianism and managerialism in the profession, to expand knowledge and breadth of understanding of disciplines, and address the current problems within library and information studies surrounding such issues as corporate information digitization and access, and technological determinism.  These debates come from scholars who wish to engage in interdisciplinary discussions such as the generation of information and the ethics surrounding access and use.   However, how to break what Gloria Lecke (2010) calls the "self legitimation cycle" (p. xii) by which the research within the field is primarily a process of legitimating the work we perform over critically engaging in questions of practice, isn't easily addressed from a top down approach.  If faculty are the only ones bringing critical analysis to the profession, I believe it will remain an intellectual pursuit outside of the work of practicing librarians and librarian practitioners will continue in research that supports the dominant practical/managerial social science perspectives thereby placing all other research in the unacceptable "other" category (Lecke, et. al, 2010).

In understanding the current situation of the profession and practitioner research, how can humanities-based scholarship become a part of discourse?  For Crowley (2005), the problem with critical theories application in library and information research is based in the problem of its inability to solve practical problems and to be in accordance with the experiences of practitioners.  Furthermore, he writes, "It will require a proverbial sea change – Rawley's

revolution or at least the presence of widely acknowledge revolutionary conditions – for a larger American culture to view the findings of critical theory as acceptable for decision making in most off-campus environments" (p. 76). This seems very negative.   I believe Crowley (2005) is correct in stating that the profession now may only see the usefulness of methodologies insofar as it solves practical problems within the profession but I also believe that as practitioners we need to reconceptualization scholarship and inquiry. I'm also a believer that a revolutionary shift is not far off for libraries and there are possibilities to guiding that shift right now if we begin the discussion.

I think we are in a state where the future of librarianship and libraries is in question.  New technologies continue to change the functional positions of librarians and our reliance on them in terms of defining our work is somewhat problematic and panic-making; however, the underlying principles in which library services and resources are developed are not based on the technology but on the mission statements of our library associations.

If we examine the values and mission statements of libraries, we find phrases on "enlightenment," "censorship," "free expression," "access to information," and the right to use the library regardless of "origin, age, background, or views" (ALA, 2011, para. 1).  These are all statements taken directly from the ALA Bill of Rights.  The question is then, where does the 'science' in library science fit into the discussions?   While much of library and information scholarship focuses on practice, whereas knowledge and meaning is determined by experience and research is meant as a process of solving problems, the value statements behind the profession of librarianship deals with the social, non-quantifiable and philosophical (Gould, 2003) (Pawley, 1995).  To ignore or exclude research that engages in, what Pawley (1995) calls, "…asking what, fundamentally, we are about…" creates a "…politically naïve profession…" (p. 132) but also ignores the foundations in which the profession was built.  I believe critical humanities scholarship offers librarians the ability to engage in discourse about our own missions and values and opens the door to the possibility of critique around the very practice of library work. I want to be clear.  I am not saying that the social science approach to library scholarship is without value, but I am saying that it cannot provide the whole picture of the profession.  As Dave said earlier, and I agree with him completely, I do not want to exclude library research that comes out of a practical problem-solving approach.  There is certainly value to this work.  However, I believe there needs to be a space for critical humanities scholarship in librarianship as a viable, important, and accepted form of inquiry especially in-light of our guiding principles that don't fall within the problem-solving paradigm or within the easily measurable or quantifiable methodology.  I believe our scholarship needs to holistically represent the profession and at this point I'm not sure it does.

I most certainly do not have the answers to the question of how to involve critical humanities research in the discourse of librarianship and my own reading of the problem has just raised more issues I think than answers but I do believe there are some interesting possible implications for critical humanities approaches to library and information research. The application of critical humanities theories can offer inquiry into such things as the corporatization of public knowledge, the organization and development of collections or subject headings that represent under-served communities, and the use of language in our institutional documents that exclude individuals development of knowledge or ways of learning based on race, sex, gender, and class. Perhaps library scholarship that includes the range of exchange, from the social scientific to humanities perspectives and methodologies, will provide a unified

voice in progressing the profession through both the practical process of, for example, developing programming and collections that represent the people we serve but also by making plain through a deeper social, cultural, class or gendered analysis, structures that hinder the profession in truly moving forward in a way that deeply connects to our un-measurable or non-quantifiable goals.

## References

American Library Association. (2011). *Library bill of rights.* Retrieved March, 2011, from http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/index.cfm

Cox, R. J. (2010). *The demise of the library school: Personal reflections on professional education in the modern corporate university.* Litwin Books.

Crowley, W. A. (2005). *Spanning the theory-practice divide in library and information science.* Scarecrow Press.

Gould, E. (2003). *The university in a corporate culture.* Yale University Press.

Leckie, G. J., Given, L. M., & Buschman, J. (2010). *Critical theory for library and information science: Exploring the social from across the disciplines*. Santa Barbara, Calif: Libraries Unlimited.

Pawley, C. (1998). Hegemony's handmaid? The library and information studies curriculum from a class perspective. *The Library Quarterly*, 123-144.

Pawley, Christine. 2003. "Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling." *The Library Quarterly* 73 (4): 422-452.