

STUDIES IN PROGRESSIVE PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP: TRAINING FOR ALTERNATIVE SERVICE

by Shiraz Durrani

In 2003, Charles Leadbeater (2003) warned that public libraries in UK are “increasingly marginalised”, are “in serious trouble”, and that their “decline could become terminal”. Almost a decade later, Leadbeater’s warning sounds even more urgent. His solution that libraries “need to respond by offering a distinctive service and experience, which builds upon their historic strengths” (p. 13) remains largely ignored and no meaningful changes have been made.

Today, a large number of libraries in UK and USA face closure allegedly caused by the current capitalist financial crisis, with thousands of libraries facing closure and many library staff, professional as well as non-professional, losing their jobs. The threat to libraries is not only closure – many are being privatised, overtly or covertly. At the same time, there appears to be a lack of seriousness among professionals and their organisations to take up these issues seriously. More damaging, information about closures and impact of privatisation is not systematically collected and analysed. It is left to progressive librarians and their organisations to highlight the reality of what is happening to libraries. The Outsourcing and Privatization wiki, for example, highlights the reality of privatisation in USA today:

The issue of privatization in libraries generated a large body of literature during the years 1996-2002. There have been considerably fewer articles written since 2002. By 2002, the issue seemed to die out, with the American Library Association never updating its policy to reflect the current realities in which extreme budget cuts have left libraries with the choice of either outsourcing or closing. Since the early 2000s many more libraries have fallen victim to the outsourcing and, while the data was sparse in 2000, data on the actual effects should be plentiful given that 10 years have passed. A recent unpublished dissertation by Hill (2009) on the increasing trend to outsource public libraries is disturbing in that no real research has been done to show what outsourcing is actually accomplishing. The biggest hurdle will be getting insight into the business practices of library service

providers. Without this visibility, there is no way to determine how much money was actually saved and even more importantly, how outsourcing has affected the mission of libraries to provide any and all information free of cost with the guarantee that First Amendment rights are protected.

The situation in UK is fast catching up with that in USA, and here also the professional body remains silent on the political trends threatening the very existence of libraries as a free, public service. Nor are there sufficient numbers of individuals who take up the challenge facing libraries today. In addition, there is no institution in UK similar to the Social Responsibilities Roundtable of ALA which

works to make ALA more democratic and to establish progressive priorities not only for the Association, but also for the entire profession. Concern for human and economic rights was an important element in the founding of SRRT and remains an urgent concern today. SRRT believes that libraries and librarians must recognize and help solve social problems and inequities in order to carry out their mandate to work for the common good and bolster democracy.

Such a progressive mandate remains beyond the scope of Chartered Institutes of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), the UK professional body, although there are smaller organisations which share SRRT's concerns for human and economic rights. However they are, at present, not in a position to take up the challenge facing libraries. Indeed, the threat of library closures, privatisation and job losses, rather than galvanising the profession into openly challenging the Government's hidden agenda of reducing the public sector and handing it over to the private sector, appears to have given up the fight. Perhaps one of the reasons for this may be that the aging senior professionals – so-called “leaders” of the profession – are approaching retirement and have no enthusiasm for the fight to save libraries as they approach retirement and look forward to their peaceful, pensionised lives. Many of them also agree with the Government's privatisation agenda and are happy to support it. It remains for the younger generation to take up the challenge. They will need to link their professional demands with the wider social and economic demands of people. Here they have a good example in the resistance in Tunisia and Egypt where all professions joined the working people – young and old – in their common struggle for equality and justice.

At the same time, the situation in libraries needs to be seen in its global context. Momentous changes in global economies and, with it, global politics are taking place today. Free market capitalism has been clearly exposed for what it is: a “free” market for global financial and linked interests to control the lives and resources of the people of the world in order to maximise profits. At the centre of globalised capitalism is the banking sector whose actions have adversely affected the lives of

millions of people around the world. While this aspect of capitalism is becoming obvious to people in the West (only) over the last few years, the countries of the South have been victims of the same manipulation and massive systematic siphoning off of resources from the poor to the rich for generations. But this was not on the conscience of the world as the victims were poor, powerless – and far away. Unemployment is rising at an alarming rate, food prices have soared, industries and agriculture are suffering. This vicious circle of lack of production and employment is then feeding yet another round of poverty and unemployment for the majority of people. At the same time, the armament industries are prospering with wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan and new ones being planned.

The academic context and approach to teaching and learning

The above provides a very brief picture of the challenges facing the profession and LIS as a whole. A related issue is whether recently qualified professional staff have the necessary skills and experience from their training programmes to understand and respond actively to the above situation. It is the contention of the writer that they are not exposed to relevant ideas and experiences to meet these essentially political and economic challenges. Library training programmes do provide a number of key technical skills but lack appropriate curricula to provide a wider understanding and tools to deal with the social and political reality of the new century. Thus a “traditional” teaching programme reproduces a “traditional” public library sector which in turn reinforces the traditional academic approach – a Catch 22 situation that urgently needs to be resolved.

One of the key aspects of teaching social aspects of library and information work should be to investigate what knowledge, skills, awareness and experiences are needed to meet challenges in today’s increasingly globalised world. The challenges includes working out how to meet the professional and work needs of library students and, in the process, expand their horizons and broaden their world outlook. An important aspect of this work is to explore alternative models of public library provision and to provide opportunities to innovate and take risks in finding a suitable model to meet local and national needs.

The search for relevance of public libraries, and its related teaching and learning requirements, took a number of forms at London Metropolitan University during the period 2005-10. At one level, this involved the development or revision of teaching Modules related to social aspects of information available for MA in Information Services Management. Such Modules included “Society, Information and Policy” (a core Module) and the optional Modules “Innovation and Development in Information Services”, “Information and Social Exclusion” and “Information for Development”. It is not within the scope of this article to examine further the development of this aspect, but this is covered in Durrani (2006-07, 2007a and b, 2008).

At another level, the learning needs of library staff at all levels were addressed by the Quality Leaders Project, Youth (QLP-Y), a work-based programme delivered at the University. This sought to develop LIS staff skills to meet needs of young people. The Project aimed to “create opportunities for young people to participate in society and to develop their creativity, reading and life skills, through developing staff skills and innovative services responsive to the needs of young people” (QLP-Y).

A follow-up of the QLP-Y was the Project, “Skills for a Globalised World: Relevant Skills for Public Library Staff” (the Skills Project). It started in June 2010 and was completed in December 2010. It provided the syllabus and Module Specifications for three Modules, linked to a “Library Skills Chart” (Library skills for a globalised world chart, 2010) which set out key skills that the Project leaders considered essential for library staff in the current global and national situation. The three Modules developed by the Project are:

1. Public libraries, policy and equality
2. Leading and managing change, innovation and development in public library services
3. Aspects of public library service design and development (Durrani and Smallwood, 2010)

The overall approach and aims of the recommended teaching and learning programme can be seen in the Module aims for the third Module, with its emphases on “critical awareness”, “developing skills” and “provide experience”:

1. To raise critical awareness of various aspects of service design and development relevant to public library services in Britain
2. To develop skills in designing and developing library service using tools appropriate to the specific aspects studied.
3. To provide experience in managing organisational issues arising from implementing a new approach implied in using these tools. (Skills for a globalised world, 2010).

Durrani and Smallwood (2010) provide an overview of the Project, the key aspects of which were then transferred to the “Studies in Progressive Librarianship” programme developed at the University of East London. This consists, at present, of two Modules, the first of which, Change Management and Leadership in Public Library Services, states that:

... the project has focused on developing a number of outline modules that can be used as stand-alone modules or as part of short courses to address specific skills gaps or used as part of a wider programme of training. However, a key component of outline module development has remained a focus on developing students as reflective practitioners within their local context, an approach that is particularly suitable for the vocational learner;

by developing skills within the workplace, supported by both employer and university, the aim has been to develop outline modules that give students the opportunity to develop the key management skills necessary for operation in a globalised public library context and thus for progression within that context.

The authors stress “that it [the skills chart, located at http://www.seapn.org.uk/content_files/files/final_skills_report_mar_2010.pdf] focuses on those areas that the authors feel are not currently widely addressed and is not a complete programme of training” (Durrani and Smallwood, 2009). As for the recommended Modules, they “focus on developing critical awareness of trends driving services and of organisational culture and factors helping/hindering the change process as well as “social aspects” of information and library work. It is assumed that technical aspects teaching (cataloguing, information retrieval, information literacy, ICT applications etc.) already provided in library and information studies courses will continue to be delivered by other modules”. The Change Management Module also needs to be seen in this context of “social aspects” of LIS work. It is sufficient here to emphasis some key aspects of the Skills Chart which are considered essential for staff at all levels in LIS. These are “critical awareness of global, local and national trends driving service change”, “critical awareness of helping/hindering organisational change”, and “management effective leadership and innovation”. We shall return to these three aspects later. The Skills Project ended at London Metropolitan University in 2010 in the expectation that University of East London would take up the pilot phase:

As indicated earlier, London Metropolitan University was unable to deliver the programme developed by the Skills Project. However, a positive development is that the University of East London (UEL) and Barking and Dagenham Library Service (B&DLS) are keen to implement the modules and the teaching and learning programme developed by the Skills Project. UEL and B&DLS are proposing to deliver a pilot module programme developed as part of the Skills Project and are, at the time of writing, in discussion with the Linking London Lifelong Learning Network on various aspects of module delivery (Durrani and Smallwood, 2010)

Development of Studies in Progressive Librarianship Programme

The first, pilot, phase of the programme was the Module “Change Management and Leadership in Public Library Service” which was developed under University of East London’s UELConnect. The pilot phase developed and delivered one Module - Change Management and Leadership in Public Library Services - from the Skills Project recommendations and was delivered to staff of London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Library Service (LBBD). It was sponsored by Linking London Lifelong Learning Network which had also sponsored the Skills Project at London Metropolitan University.

UELConnect set up a Project Team to oversee the project. The Team approved the programme in September 2010. This provided for a 10-week teaching programme with each week divided into three one-hour sessions: a lecture, a student debate and workshop session, and a “learning by doing” session. The assessment was also agreed with the submission date of 29 November 2010.

The programme and some initial achievements

The teaching programme started on September 6, 2010 with 11 students, all fulltime staff in the LBBB Library Service. One subsequently withdrew for personal reasons. At Week 5 (4 October) it was decided to add an extra week (Week 11) to be held on 15 November to allow for the fact that one lecture had to be cancelled due to transport difficulties. This also allowed for a full lecture by the Associate Director of UEL University Library. The opportunity was also taken to include additional support for students on the extra day.

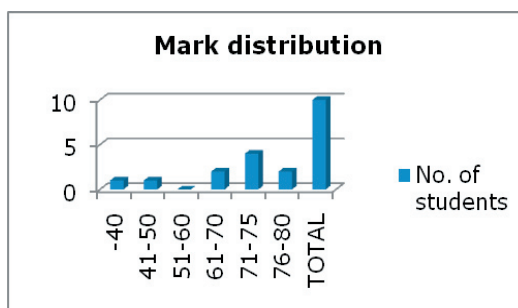
An overview of the Module was presented in the final lecture on 15 November 2010, entitled “Change management and leadership in public library services, Review: what we have learnt, what remains”.

Important features of the programme were the participation of policy makers at national and local levels in the programme, visits by students to other institutions, including the University Library at the University of East London Library in the Docklands and an “investigating communities” bus ride within the Borough as part of building up local community profile.

Outcomes and evaluation: Student achievement

Ten students participated in the programme with all completing the Module and handing in their final assessments reports. Nine achieved the required pass marks of 40%. 6 achieved marks above 71%. Mark distribution was as follows:

Marks	No. of students
-40	1
41-50	1
51-60	0
61-70	2
71-75	4
76-80	2
TOTAL	10



Student evaluation

The programme started with students indicating their expectations of the Module on how they feel the Module would help them in their work, in their personal development. They also indicated three areas they would like included in the Module. These helped to plan the teaching and learning programme within the scope of the Module. While it was not possible to include everything the student desired, their views will help any follow-up programmes.

The end-of-the-Module student feedback took the form of a four-page questionnaire.

Student and mentor/management evaluation

Nine students returned the questionnaire. All were, in general, happy with the Module, with comments such as “very good for library staff and managers”. Among recommendations for work after the Module ended included the setting up of a focus Group made up of Module participants so to continue the learning process started at the Module. Management comments included the observation that this was an “excellent opportunity for our staff to work with a highly experienced tutor in this field as it opened up their minds to libraries in a global context. This knowledge could then be used to understand and improve their own, local service”. They noticed that “all ten of the students have gained in confidence and skills in the areas covered and they have already contributed to the service developments in such areas as community profiles and Equalities Impact Assessments”. They further observed that the students were “not only being role models to their fellow staff but want their colleagues to have the same opportunity to attend as it was such an invaluable experience for them”.

Resources generated by the programme

A website carrying all documents, lecture notes and resources from the Module has been set up as part of the Skills Project. It is available to the general public at: http://www.seapn.org.uk/editorial.asp?page_id=69. Included are lecture notes, presentations by guest speakers and handouts.

Review and achievement of project aims

The Skills Project “sought to develop a relevant learning programme that meets the needs of learners and employers in programmes at universities, with the specific aim of developing relevant learning opportunities for public library staff”. (Skills Project 2010). The Skills Project had two key outcomes: the Library Skills Chart (2010) and specifications for three Modules:

- Public Libraries, Policy and Equality
- Leading and managing change, innovation & development in PLS
- Aspects of public library service design and development

This plan had to be altered to meet the financial constraints of the programme at UEL. The three were reduced to just one and it was felt that key elements from all three Modules needed to be included to provide an overview on public library service. While the final “Change Management” Project did manage to include these key elements, it did not allow for an in-depth understanding that would have been achieved had all three Modules had been offered. This was confirmed in student feedback.

Another challenge was to provide a balance between theory and practice, between an academic approach and a professional perspective, as well as between class learning and work-based learning. The approach taken was to include theoretical work in lectures which covered key national, international and local policy documents and practices. The link to work-place was provided at a number of levels. One was the establishment of senior management team members from LBBB Library Service as mentors to each student. Another was to make the coursework relevant to local situations. This was for students to “prepare a proposal for a pilot project to deliver a new library service as a way of meeting new or unmet needs”. The students were expected to discuss the project proposal with their mentors to ensure they took on a project which had local relevance. The high marks achieved by students indicates that they fulfilled their coursework requirements to a high standard. Yet another approach was to get key local and national policy decision makers to present their perspectives on change management in public library service.

At the centre of the programme was an aspect highlighted in the Skills Project final report: The need for innovative thinking – and its implementation – is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the information and library profession in the public library context in Britain today...What is missing in the real world of public librarianship is a discussion – and implementation – of innovation based on clear analyses of the needs in communities. This aspect was emphasised through the lectures and in recommended readings. That the students engaged with this approach is evident from their feedback.

Another aspect that the programme aimed to address was again something highlighted by the Skills Project: “At the centre of this vacuum in ideas for public libraries and in discussion about staff/librarian development, is vagueness about the purpose and the role of information and public libraries in today’s world”. It was to overcome “this vacuum” that much attention was placed on theory and practice of working out what public libraries were all about. Thus the UNESCO/IFLA document “Public Library Service” formed the basis of discussions on the role of public libraries. This combined with an attempt to understand local needs and policies, and involved, among other areas, a bus ride through local areas to better understand local conditions, needs and people – something that proved extremely useful and popular with the students.

Overall the Project attempted to follow the approach recommended by the Skills Project:

The approach to public library staff skills development, as detailed in this report, is one way of bridging skills gaps in a changing situation. The strength of this approach lies in the fact that it does a number of things: provides academic credits; is a work-based programme; is linked to academic practice; is based on a partnership between professionals, academicians and service providers; provides a flexible learning approach for students so as to suit staff at different levels of qualification and experience; it offers a new approach to library authorities in developing staff; offers the opportunity to develop internal (within authorities) and external (with other authorities and organisations) partnerships; can be delivered in a flexible way (in individual workplaces if required) and provides a programme flexible enough to meet the needs of individual students and their employers. (Skills Project, 2010).

As a pilot project, the Change Management programme did not meet the first requirement – “provide academic credits.” However, the fact the programme was delivered under the University of East London rules and requirements provided a strong academic link and it is expected that this will be done for a more permanent programme.

As for the other requirements, the pilot project demonstrated clearly that all these are achievable with ample evidence provided by the students themselves and also by the confidence of the Management Team at the Library Service of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The achievement of personal development aspects of the programme is covered by student feedback mentioned earlier in this Report. The service development aspect is also an important area that was achieved. The innovative approach taken by students is evident from the coursework project proposals chosen by the students. It is noteworthy that all proposals include a resource plan as well implementation plan and timing. It is also important to note that all the projects relate to local needs and have been developed with a deep commitment to developing local services within limited budgets. This indicates that there is already a reservoir of innovative thinking among the staff in public libraries and this needs an avenue for creative thinking to be translated into project proposals – and implemented. The Module provided one such avenue. The student project proposals are listed below:

1. A proposal to set up a work club in the BLC Library
2. A library project to support the socialisation and education of new parents
3. Learning resource pack
4. A proposal for set up a magazine to support children’s reading group.

5. Pilot project to inspire local community access to the public library
6. Project to start a reading group for adult learners at Barking Library
7. ICT for older adults
8. Project to bring back the lost generations to Barking and Dagenham Libraries
9. Project to start a reading group for adult learners at Barking Library
10. Commissioning the delivery of story and rhyme time sessions to children's service.

*Alternative public library services:
meeting challenges, retaining public service ethos Module 2*

Following the successful conclusion of the pilot project, the staff group indicated their interest in continuing the course and decided to bid to Linking London for funds for a second module to take place later this year. In preparation for this, an outline programme was prepared, under the title "Alternative public library services: meeting challenges, retaining public service ethos". The content reflected the need to equip those who had successfully completed the first Module with additional skills to meet current challenges. The proposed lecture programme is as follows:

Week	TOPIC
1	Introduction to the Module
2	Public libraries in the globalised capitalist world
3	Are public libraries meeting people's needs?
4	Information for development or for profit?
5	Public or private? policies affecting libraries
6	People and power: creating a new world
7	New vision of public library service in a rapidly changing world
8	Meeting financial challenges
9	Staff, managers and public on board?
10	Communication for a new world & the role of ICT
11	Review & revision

Also proposed are a number of changes that reflect feedback received from students. These include the expansion of lecture time as well as the workshop and debates from one to one-and-a-half hours each while the Learning-by-Doing sessions are recommended to be half-day events to enable visits to other institutions.

The proposed coursework is now in the form of two options so that students can choose the option that best reflects their learning and work needs best:

Coursework

Complete EITHER Option A or Option B

Option A (2,000 words)

LBBB Libraries have been asked to make a 10% saving in the library budget. You have been asked by Head of Libraries and Leisure to prepare a plan to achieve this saving. Using publicly available statistics, set out your proposals which should include a well-reasoned case to justify your proposals, retaining a strong public service ethos. Your plan should include:

1. Overview on the effects of the proposals and how you intend to address these.
2. Staffing structure, setting out proposals for management, professional and other staff.
3. Service delivery aspects.
4. Managing public expectations while you meet national and international requirements on the role of a public library service.
5. Consultation, marketing and communication implications of implementing your proposals.

Option B (2,000 words)

Both the questions below are to be answered:

1. Critically assess the benefits and shortcoming of the three ways of providing public library service: public sector, private sector, voluntary sector. Give your preferred method, giving arguments backed by evidence as far as possible. (1,000 words).
2. Provide a case study of two public library services – in Britain or overseas - indicating how they have addressed the current financial and political situation facing public library service. Discuss critically the approach which you consider to be the “best fit” in meeting public needs. (1,000 words).

At the time of writing this, it is not clear whether funds will be secured.

Conclusion

The development and delivery of the Change Management Module indicates that the recommendations and proposals from the Skills Project are a valid approach to meeting the skills development needs of library staff while also meeting the service development requirements for public library service.

It is recommended that Barking and Dagenham Library service adopt the recommendations made by the students, as they have already indicated they intend to do.

Given the present situation of public libraries in England, it is necessary that all staff have the relevant competencies to develop and deliver a relevant service within reduced resources. The delivery of Modules such as the Change Management one (as well as others recommended by the Skills Project) is one way of developing such competencies. It is also

cost effective as it is delivered with fewer resources than sending the same number of staff to just one day each of “normal” professional staff training event. This Change Management/Skills approach, in addition, provides a wide range of skills, awareness and widening of outlooks together with practical experience and new learning opportunities. It is however important to base any such programmes within the scope of an academic institution, as was done by the UEL in this case.

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